

Plan Wellstone

Conspiracy, Complicity, and the Left

Anu Bonobo

2004

Back in October 2002, driving from the hills to the anti-war rally in the city, we had plenty of time to talk. Conversation immediately turned to a possible conspiracy behind the plane crash the previous day. Did Bush's people assassinate liberal senator Paul Wellstone just days before his possible re-election?

To assume a sinister government plot each time a liberal or radical figure dies is a stretch, but to ignore the possibility entirely is denial. In a 1999 civil suit, lawyer William Pepper convinced a jury in Memphis that prophetic peace and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. was not terminated by a lone killer but by a vast conspiracy that included the FBI, CIA, the military, and others. This case confirmed what many people already knew and speculated since almost immediately after the killing.

If Wellstone's crash involved foul play by Bush gangsters (a speculation that's compellingly eerie and similar to other possible assassinations by aviation), the motive would be clear. While not a radical, Wellstone's strident and principled liberal agenda threatened the Republican grip on congress and Bush's unabashed imperial ambitions.

In 2001, talking passionately with a close friend in the wake of 9/11, I broached the topic: Do you think Bush knew this was coming, refused to prevent it, and used it to his advantage? The response was quick and blunt: "You can't say that."

Americans can talk of Stalin and Hitler's hideous crimes but when talk turns to the malevolence inherent in the American empire, critics are told to beware of what "you cannot say." Of course, plenty of people do speculate about the criminal syndicate controlling American political life, and the conspiracy theory milieu has been experiencing an electronic revival since 9/11. But while the academic intelligentsia can tolerate 33 flavors of dense discourse and post-structuralist, neo-marxist mish-mash, most of the left's tenured spokespersons from Chomsky to Zinn get silent or turn heel when activists mention cabals and conspiracies, secret societies and draconian strategies.

Conspiracies refer to intentional, malicious acts planned in secret; conspiracy theory is the writing, research, and debate devoted to uncovering and explaining these. Sometimes, conspiracy theory pushes a legalistic agenda for punishing the perpetrators; other times, the work analyzes conspiracy as an inherent function of excessive power.

The editors of a forthcoming encyclopedia of conspiracy theories define the larger genre like this: "In short, conspiracy theories are a popular explanation of the workings of power, responsibility, and causality in the unfolding of events. They have appealed to both the left and the right, both the uneducated and scholars, and have been told both by and about those at the very heart of power."

By bringing hearty suspicion, healthy fascination, and critical thinking to conspiracies and anti-conspiracy orthodoxies alike, anarchists, free-thinkers, and independent ultra-leftists might have some interesting things to offer this conversation. Radicals and anarchists might reject the common kneejerk allergy to conspiracy theory; on the other hand, conspiracists should abandon their thick, detailed research long enough to ponder the revolutionary implications of what they discover.

While cruel conspiracies of authoritarian military, political, economic, and religious control do exist, while conspiracy research has evolved into a widely-practiced and published genre of inquiry, most radicals, leftists, and some anarchists join the sober, centrist mainstream in marginalizing and rejecting the dialogue out-of-hand, lest they be implicated with the preachy, paranoid conspiracy buffs. This essay seeks to resuscitate conspiracy theory for radicals and combat the conclusive condemnation it receives by the left's most esteemed and outspoken critics.

Conspiracy: Left, right, and weird

Conspiracy chatter comes in many colors and is a rather all-American fascination. Conspiracy crawls onto television with the popular X-Files and sneaks into Hollywood with Oliver Stone's epic JFK. In a way, the Kennedy assassination is to conspiracy theory as Shakespeare is to theater. For now, I'm most interested in the scenarios sketched, questions raised, and actions implied by political conspiracies. If any tendency unites the far-flung suppositions of conspiracists across the ideological divide, it's the idea that conspiracies are motivated by pure and unmitigated evil. Questioning the nature and existence of this "evil"—if it exists at all—often takes on a mystical quality, which is one of many reasons that rational thinkers tend to reject conspiracy theories out of hand.

On the right, conspiracies describe a one-world, secular, communist super-state engineered by jackbooted Democratic Party bureaucrats and tree-hugging New Agers at the United Nations; almost always, this paranoia clings to guns and god for justification and promotes racism and ethnophobia. Its most successful recruiting tools include the mid-1990s government attacks on the Branch-Davidians and the patriots at Ruby Ridge. For the last decade, this brand of suspicious and specious mania has found a mainstream bully pulpit 'on right-wing talk radio.

Perhaps motivated by a profound distaste for the conspiracies of the right—especially when we are the targets—many left activists promote an ideological aversion to conspiracy theory. But conspiracy theory does have a potent radical tendency that traces all evil to a power-obsessed elite of corporate and government criminals hell-bent on global, imperial domination. As many of the conspiracies embedded in the military, corporate, intelligence complex are exposed as fact, the lines between radical conspiracy theory and radical journalism blur.

Today, everyone views the 1960s and '70s attacks on militant African-American and Native-American activists by the government's malicious COINTELPRO apparatus as fact. However, like many State plans to suppress rebellious groups and populations, it emerged in a climate of secrecy. While many identify that counter-intelligence program as an isolated part of a corrupt 1970s intelligence community, those practices continued with the 1980s infiltration of groups opposing US intervention in Central America and providing Sanctuary to refugees. Then, COINTELPRO was born again in the bombing of an Earth First! shero, Judi Bari. Before her death, Bari remarked, "There is something else I need to say about the bombing: Was this bombing done by a lone person?—by a lone, angry logger or whomever? I don't think so. And there are several reasons why I don't think so. What I am going to say is I believe that the whole thing, including the arrest, was a conspiracy that happened in advance. And I can't prove FBI complicity, but it is certainly implied."

How many people recognizing or speculating about similar scenarios today are dismissed as purporting paranoid fantasy? Largely because of their likely truth, a brief sample of the current, more popular, conspiracies being exposed, researched, and combated by left conspiracists today includes: the CIA's continued involvement in drug trafficking to fund terrorism; the Bush administration's complicity to, compliance in, or contribution to the tragedy of 9/11; the theft of the 2000 presidential election; the possible theft of the 2004 election with the help of companies manufacturing electronic voting machines; the guarantee that Democrat or Republican will work for the same elite, shadow government as exemplified by the emergence of corporate clone John Kerry, member of the secret Skull and Bones Society, as the democratic front-runner in 2004.

The left's anti-conspiracy scripture

The doctrinaire aversion to conspiracy can be found among the left's most successful spokespersons. Howard Zinn summarizes the stance best: "It's always intriguing to talk about conspiracies. But it's a diversion from real issues. They are attractive because they simplify problems and enable people to focus on a handful of people instead of on complex causes."

Noam Chomsky and Michael Albert in particular promote the official alternative to conspiracy theory; it's called institutional analysis. Chomsky elaborates: "[Conspiracy theory is] just one of the devices that's used in the American indoctrination system to prevent scrutiny of power. If somebody does try to provide a critical analysis of American institutions, one of the ways in which you try to suppress this is to say, well, it's a devil theory or a conspiracy theory or so on. On the contrary, this is just normal institutional analysis. These are institutional structures that exist." Few of us would label Chomsky a fringe critic, but even his highly rational and nuanced investigations can get labeled "conspiracy" by our enemies. Perhaps Chomsky dismisses conspiracy theory because so many on the right have used conspiracy notions to dismiss him?

Since the electoral coup of 2000 and the 9/11 attacks, the proliferation of political conspiracy investigations has intensified. People everywhere agree the Bush regime is worse than we anticipated. Mainstream pundits have invoked comparisons to the Nazis and the Roman empire. However ferocious this neoconservative faction proves to be, politically proper progressives still refuse to entertain the validity of the best documented and most rational conspiracy theories such as the role of neoconservative think tanks in planning the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq even before Bush's coronation. In fact, it is in response to the conspiracy theories emerging after 9/11 that Michael Albert of *Z Magazine* and Z Net published the most thorough and clear denunciation of conspiracy.

His core thesis follows thusly: "Conspiracy theories have manageable implications. They imply that all was well once and that it can be okay again if only the conspirators can be pushed aside. Conspiracy theories therefore explain ills without forcing us to disavow society's underlying institutions. They allow us to admit horrors, and express our indignation and anger without rejecting the basic norms of society. We can even confine our anger to the most blatant perpetrators."

But what happens when we finally admit that conspiracy itself is a necessary norm for the state and capital? Shouldn't we hold despotic perpetrators accountable at the same time we dismantle the institutional underpinnings that prop them up?

Albert continues to assert that conspiracy only focuses on individual aberrations, not systemic flaws: "We need to get rid of the bad apples. All this is convenient and seductive. We can reject specific candidates but not government, specific CEOs but not capitalism, specific writers, editors, and even owners of periodicals, but not all mainstream media. We reject some vile manipulators, but not society's basic institutions. We can therefore continue to appeal to the institutions for recognition, status, or payment."

These rhetorically savvy views function as gospel among leftists; that any self-respecting radical would deviate from the Albert doctrine only confirms the need to continue the doctrine. Albert's total denunciation of conspiracy culture raises several problems, but these have little or nothing to do with "institutional analysis." Institutional critiques of the economic, political, and ideological matrix in which war, racism, sexism, and economic exploitation operate are absolutely essential towards radical awareness.

In fact, radicals often engage in structural critiques alongside conspiracy-related inquiries. But institutional analysis, as an end in itself, eschews the obvious: all institutions are by their nature oppressive and run by individuals; with a vested interest in protecting personal power, these individuals either actively promote or are tacitly complicit in acts of domination, and they have names, addresses, vast assets, and an able network through which to do wrong; these criminals at the top of the social pyramid should not only be held accountable, they should be overthrown. Why do leftists assume that avid conspiracy theorists would simply remove a despot and leave the despotic system in place?

To assume that conspiracists only see simplicity and refuse to grapple with complexity is only useful when discrediting conspiracy research, theory, and activism wholesale. The institutions of empire and capitalism cooperate with, facilitate, and require conspiracy to expand and survive. Institutional theory and conspiracy theory are not antonyms but different methods among many advocated as radical analyses of historical trends. Refusing to

acknowledge the differences between various conspiracy theories, Albert bludgeons the best of conspiracy-tinted radicalism with the same leftist hammer.

Why not combine institutional and individual analyses with still more avenues of enlightened critique and engaged resistance? Even the best critiques left theorists marshal against conspiracy research usually tarnish the entire genre as bogus. Conspiracy theory without a critique of institutions will falter in a marsh of legalistic detail; institutional analyses without a means for acknowledging and combating individual culpability will remain insightful but ultimately impotent tools in the larger struggle. Finally, theories themselves prefigure but do not create revolutions.

Secret teams and transparent spectacles

Conspiracy theory is not necessarily an ideological gateway drug leading to apathy and alien obsession, especially when it unearths the cold, naked facts of our shared alienation. That some conspiracists do not see the obvious conclusion of their efforts in a revolution for everything is not the fault of conspiracy per se. The leftists correctly argue that we cannot confront the individual bad guys without first questioning and undermining the institutions they serve. However, these institutions will never be undermined, much less abolished, if the entrenched elite continues to control.

For some, conspiracy theory is merely a form of fascinating, titillating entertainment like politicized comic books, tarot cards, and Sci-fi novels. Other radicals use conspiracy theory as a tool for awareness and enlightenment, not as an excuse to spend endless hours dedicated to dredging up more details.

In the long view, ending the greatest conspiracy of the State and Capital involves subverting the transparent spectacle as much as overthrowing the secret team. For the relatively privileged, the illusion of freedom must confront the enslavement we find in our own denial and our willingness to remain even partially obedient. At the authoritarian core is not government conspiracy, but the masses' complicity in the psychology of submission. Revolutionary direct action is the only lasting antidote to such crippling compliance, especially when our very methods further the anti-authoritarian vision. If we ever hope to oust the invisible authorities from their secret chambers of sadistic control, we can begin by confronting the visibly authoritarian patterns in our everyday lives.

fifth Estate

Anu Bonobo
Plan Wellstone
Conspiracy, Complicity, and the Left
2004

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/364-spring-2004/plan-wellstone>
Fifth Estate #364, Spring, 2004

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net