

Conspiracy or Anarchy

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Andrew Dobbs

Like God before her, Reason is dying. Her fast life has taken its toll: God took a millennium or two to live out His days, Reason has had a mere three centuries of gallivanting to the moon and back.

People now find her insufficient to explain their experience of nature just as they once found God unnecessary.

Rational logic triumphed because it didn't answer "because God made it so" or "it's magic." It offered more testable and nuanced reasons for natural phenomena.



– Stephen Goodfellow

Reason seemed more utile than her predecessors, but now this utility looks disastrously inconvenient: the threats of nuclear war, global terrorism, ecological catastrophe, cultural decadence and the misery of our emerging cyber-punk dystopia raise doubts as to Reason's ultimate usefulness. Social conformity is now called "Freedom" in the common tongue, and the load-bearing walls of power's edifice are called "rights." Logic no longer orders everyday reality, and Reason is increasingly impotent—the grave rushes to meet her.

In this context, myths—fantastic narratives explaining the mundane elements of natural experience have made a comeback. In their heyday, a dozen or more centuries ago, myths were inscribed in the discourses most credible then: bardic poetry, folktales, paintings and drama. Today's myths are inscribed in our most credible discourse: scientific theory. As Reason fails to explain public things, so-called conspiracy theories spread their thrall.

These myths are inherently reactionary, and any movement rooted in them will bear monstrous fruits destructive to human freedom. This is particularly exigent today because we risk missing the moment when Reason can be succeeded by something truly liberatory, where the terms of history are redefined and the opportunities for freedom might be widened. Knowing why people believe these ideas and how these beliefs rot movements for real change is key to making it through our times.

Conspiracy theories can appeal to some radicals by claiming to analyze issues of real concern. They see a world where power is concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, where state secrecy and surveillance are more and more common and in which popular opportunities for resistance erode further every day. These are real concerns, but conspiracists have inane systems for connecting these facts and they marry them to perceived threats which lead them to ignore real change.

A fevered hunt for new connections replaces honest curiosity, so conspiracists never really learn how power works. For example, every conspiracy theory asks the indignant question, "Why is the government keeping secrets if there's nothing to hide?"

Anarchy can answer this question: states lie and keep secrets because that's what they do. In totalitarian states nobody is allowed any secrets, but all of the states' activities are secret. Short of this, every state maintains secrets, and they all maintain surveillance methods to dispel individual secrets. Unanswered questions in the 9/11 Commission Report or shady behavior by G-men indicate nothing like what conspiracists imagine. It is done for no reason beyond the routine extension of the state's domain. It works better without a reason—you don't need a conspiracy to explain things.

Conspiracists attach themselves to retrograde canards of the ruling order. Our eroding "U.S. national sovereignty" is one of their chief worries. Sovereignty, according to the dictionary, means "the state of being a...supreme ruler," so the conspiracist right wing fears any alternate supreme ruler, such as the United Nations or the mythical North American Union that would replace the domestic nation state.

Internationalism and immigrants pouring across the border threaten them because it could mean they'll be ruled by foreigners rather than bureaucrats of their own color and kind. That perhaps each individual ought to rule oneself never occurs to them; they instead yearn for nationalism and that can purify their rule.

Even those leftists drawn from the anti-war movements or numbed to nonsense by hysterical Bush hatred end up as reactionaries. Progressives inspired by conspiracists get tunnel vision about "bankers" at the expense of analyzing capital's broader crimes or apologize for the Taliban and al Qaeda as unfairly maligned by the "Inside Job." That this fringe fantasy is now widely held among proles and radicals alike, is good news to power, indeed.

Myths also bear utility for their believers. Believing that rain comes from a particular deity with well-known likes, dislikes and means of communication assuages one's concern about the weather. Similarly, believing that a clandestine cult has awesome control over the function of global power absolves one of any responsibility for power's crimes. If 9/11 was the work of Dick Cheney, et al, and not al Qaeda, then the fact that North American people have long ignored or endorsed a loathsome Mideast policy in return for cheap oil and cash investment need not bother us. Like misbehaving children conspiracists insist, "not my fault."

This is the soul of reaction, the ugly vice which doesn't hold us back so much as turn us out (in the pimp's sense); it makes us forswear freedom for some pitiful treat. Freedom only exists under conditions of responsibility, and responsibility itself liberates.

Once the horror of discovering your responsibility for the totality of your life passes, one is empowered. Direct action follows from this discovery; this is the heart of anarchy. To instead refuse even the merest responsibility for the prevailing order with fantastic scapegoats is to bar all paths to addressing our crimes.

Their praxis is insidious, too. The conspiracist bogeymen are, in fact, contemptible—bankers, the Bush and Obama administrations, international bureaucracies, but conspiracy theories take advantage of honest opposition to these elements and canalize this energy into irrelevance.

Conspiracists always demand “A New Investigation,” and their activism consists of the same boring, sign-waving, handbill pushing, and orchestrated shouting characteristic of the mainstream. As Reason dies, conspiracists exploit the energy of this revolutionary moment for base reformism.

Such reform movements improve power’s operations. Reformists cannot envision a world without state, money, or God, and insist that these institutions shape up and ingratiate themselves more comfortably into our lives. The institutions of authority benefit from the way conspiracist reformism makes the state a distant, omnipotent force as opposed to the immediate creation of our own perverted desires. Conspiracy theory seeps into all our ideologies, making resistance seem futile and submission inevitable.

Under anarchy, we liberate ourselves; under the conspiracy, subjection is our comfort.

Still, it isn’t just right-wing quacks and left-wing liberals who tolerate conspiracy theory; some anarchists do as well. If people now believe the bankers and feds can commit any atrocious act—kill thousands of their own citizens to start wars of conquest or use “chemtrails” to control our brains—they think, that is good. Yet while it is good that people believe the government is capable of any evil, conspiracists don’t follow this to the conclusion that the state ought to be abolished. Conspiracism does not undermine the state, the state’s crumbling legitimacy creates the material basis for conspiracism’s rise.

Your typical right wing conspiracist just wants “the good of days” back, or “Constitutional governance,” or other reactionary red herrings. Well-meaning progressive leftists—on the other hand—who lack anarchist or even Marxist theories of power end up spoiling campus radicalism, the peace movement, resistance to the expansion of the state’s power, and other movements. They supplant direct action or at least direct demands with pushes for the “New Investigation” and activism aimed at stopping fantasy threats.

If we are to tap the tremendous energy wasted in conspiracy mongering, we must start with the issue of efficiency. One can sympathize with some conspiracist concerns all the while offering better explanations. A tiny, interconnected, world-ruling elite does exist, but this elite’s power isn’t a secret, and their aims and operations are quite public. Self-replicating power inevitably accrues to fewer and fewer hands, but we don’t need the Illuminati or the Bilderberg Group to explain this.

Direct action offers concrete opportunities to attack and undermine the real conspiracy of power. We can assume responsibility and be free. This narrative can compete with the conspiracism that oozes out of the status quo.

But anarchy is, after all, a narrative, a simplification of reality a myth. Reason’s collapse is about how one myth—that innovation, technology and development can persist infinitely—has run its course. The desire for a new myth won’t be satisfied by some absolute objective standard for Truth, it will be satisfied by the strongest of Reason’s challengers.

Anarchy is a myth which posits chaos as the only true order, which indicts attempts at control for increasing the level of disorder. There is, thus, no power higher than the individual conscience ordering one’s own life.

Institutions of authority consume individuals as parasites on human life and freedom. By reorganizing our lives around human-scale institutions, and by creatively destroying the state, market, and church among other monstrous systems, human freedom can reign.

All this to say, what we believe matters. The notion that there are no natural laws and so our consciences are the highest power looks just as wild in the light of “reality” as the idea that a powerful secret cult rules the world for arcane ends. The difference is in what each demands of their respective adherents.

Conspiracists spin in a totalitarian frenzy; anarchists take power for themselves, over themselves. One is attuned to the decadent childishness of our time, eager to abandon all hope for freedom to avoid any threat of responsibility.

The other offers a maturity the future demands. Reason is dying, and a new answer will be sought by history soon. We can be defeated by this history or we can write it in the tongue of our wills.

Conspiracy or Anarchy: when many are compelled to answer, the age will have pulled up to its end.

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