

Good, Bad, and Ugly Conspiracy Theories

by Paul Austin Murphy (October 2016)



Let the UK *Independent* introduce us to contemporary conspiracy theories. Nick Harding [writes](#):

"The number of people who believe conspiracy theories is staggering. According to various recent surveys, a third of Brits believe Princess Diana was murdered (a Daily Mail survey), a quarter believe the moon landings were faked (from Engineering and Technology magazine), nearly half of all Americans do not believe global warming is man-made (a Yale University survey) and 84 per cent of them believe 9/11 was an inside job (a New York Times/CBS poll)."

I must confess to being sceptical about most – nearly all – conspiracy theories. *Relatively* sceptical, that is (as will become clear).

Take this very common problem just to begin with. What does the conspiracist do when he discovers that there are various mutually-contradictory theories about the very same conspiracy (as is the case with 9/11, AIDs, J.F. Kennedy, Jack the

London Ripper, etc.)?

However, it's also the fact that particular conspiracy theories are particularly suited to advance a specific political cause (or justify a political obsession, or confirm already-existing belief/biases/prejudices) that causes me the most problems. Scratch the average political conspiracist for a while and one will often find that he's a thoroughly political animal furthering a specific agenda – whether of the Right or Left.

There are also a few – or many? – conspiracists who quite literally believe all the conspiracy theories they come across. Of course not many people believe all conspiracy theories. Many will believe a couple or even just one.

So let's think about the term "conspiracy theory" itself. Taken literally, these two words shouldn't really be seen as judgemental or critical. If we were to say, "theories about conspiracies," then that would make things clearer. As it is, though, the term is almost always used critically or sarcastically. (I believe one "conspiracy theory" in the list above; or, at the least, I *partly* believe it.)

Mitigated Scepticism

There are at least two books on conspiracy theories which conveniently tackle each conspiracy theory at a time. They also take fairly divergent views on conspiracy theories as a whole; which, in itself, is worth looking into.

The first book, [*The Little Book of Conspiracies*](#) (by Joel Levy), accepts a degree of truth in many well-known conspiracy theories. The second book, [*A Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*](#) (by James McConnachie and Robin Tudge), downplays most of them. Up to a point this is strange because their analyses of conspiracy theories are often similar in style and content. However, the fact that Joel Levy's book has the word 'Conspiracies' in the title, rather than McConnachie and Tudge's 'Theories', partly explains their divergences.

Despite that, even the conspiracy theory sceptics – James McConnachie and Robin Tudge – are more than happy to admit that

"all too frequently the term 'conspiracy theory' has provided those in power with a convenient way of brushing serious allegations aside, with the

result that the official version of events prevails” (xi).

So it's clear that even sceptics allow the possibility that at least some conspiracy theories portray the facts. In tandem with this, it's also true that some critics of conspiracy theories (at least in government form) do indeed have a lot to gain from retaining the “official version” of events.

The sceptics McConnachie and Tudge clearly don't accept the *theory* that all conspiracists are loons who're locked-up in their bedrooms with nothing but a computer to pass the time with. Instead, “the official version of events is subject to ever-increasing scrutiny” (xi).

Thus, in this day and age, conspiracists “stoke fear and outrage in the Middle East”. They also “inspire homespun ‘patriot’ movements in the US.” In addition:

“They make liberal Europeans cynical and apathetic. They influence the politics of the entire Italian nature. They spawn computer games... hip-hop albums... films... and a whole sub-genre of fiction...” (xi)

Surely amongst all the above there must be at least some truth. Perhaps a lot of truth!

Joel Levy, as I said, tends to be far less sceptical than McConnachie and Tudge. Indeed Kenn Thomas (the editor at [Steamshovel](#) Press) says that Levy “does not embrace every theory as absolute truth, but neither does he dismiss them as total bunk.” This hints at a progression from conspiracy theories deemed to be “total bunk” to those which Levy largely accepts as true (or at least largely true).

When it comes to 9/11, even McConnachie and Tudge are positive about at least some of the theories about these events. Or, at the least, they put the conspiracists' positions without offering much criticism.

As for Levy, take just one example (amongst very many).

Levy writes that there is “evidence that the FBI investigations into some hijackers were squashed from on high in the weeks proceeding 9/11” (56). This points to the idea that Bush and Co. let the attack happen. Or as Levy puts it:

“The President and his cabinet... definitely benefited from the atrocity.

Before 9/11, Bush was a lame duck president struggling to escape questions about his fraudulent election..."

There are many other anomalies and problems regarding 9/11 which Levy tackles. However, with his four years of retrospect, Levy believes that

"the most disturbing part of the whole [9/11] scenario has been the remarkable quiescence of mainstream media and its reluctance to challenge the unconvincing official version." (59)

In terms of Levy (the Believer) being sceptical, he doesn't seem to have much time for conspiracy theories about the Illuminati. Nonetheless, it's not the theories themselves which Levy disparages: it's one of the consequences of them. Levy claims that talk

"about the Illuminati and their new world order simply obscures and detracts from genuinely helpful conspiracy research, helping those with something to hide – the secret state, for instance – to dismiss serious researchers as nuts and fruitcakes." (78)

Conspiracies & Conspiracies Theories About Conspiracies Theories

Tudge and McConnachie cite various conspiracies which actually occurred. They give the following examples:

"... the politically-motivated plot to kill Fidel Castro, the 'Iran-Contra' affair, the barely-legal rigging of the US presidential elections in 1876 and the Nazi conspiracy to murder millions of European Jews." (ix)

An even more sceptical commentator on conspiracy-theorising, David Aaronovitch (in his [Voodoo Histories](#)), also accepts the fact that conspiracies have and still do occur. He cites a couple of his own examples. Thus:

"Not counting Watergate... the Iran-Contra affair of 1985-6... The great British conspiracy is the Zinoviev letter of 1924... apparently approving of the pro-Bolshevik stance of Labour [Party]..." (8)

Of course many conspiracy-theory sceptics do offer arguments as to why they're sceptical.

David Aaronovitch, for example, detects various problems.

For example, there is “the tendency among conspiracists to quote each other so as to suggest a wide spread expertise lending support to the argument.” (12) In addition, we have the “death by footnote” syndrome. In this case,

“the exposition of the theory is a dense mass of detailed and often undifferentiated information, but laid out as an academic text. Often the theory is supported by quotations from non-conspiracist sources that almost invariably turn out to be misleading and selective.” (12)

The following words – from Aaronovitch again – are also a telling critique of conspiracists (which can also be applied to Marxists). He writes:

“Conspiracists [Marxists] are always winners. Their arguments have a determined flexibility whereby any new and inconvenient truth can be accommodated within the theory itself.” (13)

Aaronovitch also cites some examples of conspiracy theories *about* conspiracy theories. He writes:

“So, embarrassing and obvious problems in the theory may be ascribed to deliberate disinformation originating with the imagined plots designed to throw activists off the scent.”

This is vaguely related to the idea that loony conspiracy theories are deliberately circulated in order to throw “activists off the scent” of real conspiracies. Joel Levy also believes that obviously-ridiculous conspiracy theories are fed to the gullible public in order to divert its attention away from truthful ones.

Some conspiracy theories about conspiracy theories (like conspiracy theories themselves) may also contain some truth – even a lot of truth! What should we make, for example, of the idea that many conspiracists “are even accused (by other conspiracy theorists) of being the public face of a conspiracy to discredit conspiracy theories” (ix)?

Noam Chomsky – an unrelenting critique of both Israelis and Jews – has also become victim of a conspiracy theory about his rejection of conspiracy theories. Chomsky, for example, rejects the conspiracy theories about 9/11. (All of them?)

So has George Monbiot; who said that such conspiracies were a “‘cowards fantasy! An excuse for inaction used by those who don’t have the stomach to engage in a real fight” (328).

Chomsky is Jewish; whereas Monbiot is not Jewish. Therefore Chomsky, and not Monbiot, has himself induced some extreme scepticism about his “real reasons” for rejecting 9/11 conspiracy theories. That’s because, in some theories about 9/11, the Jews/Israelis/Zionists are blamed. And, as I said, Chomsky is a Jew. Thus Professor Anthony J. Hall – of the University of Lethbridge in Canada – has written an article entitled, ‘9/11 and the Zionist Question: Is Noam Chomsky a Disinfo Agent for Israel?’ (This article, in the *American Herald Tribune*, can be found [here](#).)

Conclusion: Total Truth/Total Falsehood?

It may not be the case that most conspiracy theories are neither completely true nor completely false. It may simply depend on examples.

Levy, for example, cites the good and bad aspects of the theory that “Elvis lives!” He writes:

“... we know that the King did try to fake his death at least once in a bizarre incident involving a bogus assassin and fake blood.” (105)

I suppose the *bad* here is to assume that because Elvis faked his own death on at least one occasion, then he must have done so at the end too. In other words, there is still evidence for the first case of fakery; though is there similar evidence for the last case?

Not many have argued that there’s no truth – or factual correctness – in all conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, what can happen, and what tends to happen, is that accepted/acceptable truths (or facts) are used to lead conspiracy theorists to untruths (or fictions). In addition, the possibility that there is at least some truth even to loony theories may well lead people to accept the entire package of a particular conspiracy theory. Indeed there may be so many variables involved in the majority of conspiracy theories that some of those variables are bound to be true (or factual). Similarly, even scientific theories go way beyond the facts (or evidence) in order to explain given phenomena. Thus in conspiracy theories too many conspiracists are bound to go beyond truth (or fact) in order

to enter the realm of explanation.... and then speculation! It's then that they may – and often do – go wrong.

*) See my [‘One’s Politics Determines One’s Conspiracy Theories’](#) and [‘Cui Bono? The Conspiracy Theorists!’](#) at *American Thinker*.

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