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Political paranoia v. political realism: on distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics

JEFFREY M. BALE

ABSTRACT Scholars and intellectuals often fail to pay sufficient attention to the historical and political importance of conspiratorial politics, that is, real-world covert and clandestine activities. This is primarily because they rarely make an effort to distinguish conceptually between such activities, which are a regular if not omnipresent feature of national and international politics, and bogus 'conspiracy theories', elaborate fantasies that purport to show that various sinister, powerful groups with evil intentions, operating behind the scenes, are secretly controlling the course of world events. Bale's purpose is to provide a clear analytical distinction between actual conspiratorial politics and 'conspiracy theories' in the pejorative sense of that term, and to suggest that research methods appropriate to investigating and analysing the former have long been available. In a world full of secret services, surreptitious pressure groups, criminal cartels and terrorist organizations, academics can no longer afford to ignore bona fide conspiratorial activities of various types, which have often had considerable historical significance in the past and are likely to continue to exert an impact on events in the future.

KEYWORDS clandestine operations, conspiracy theories, covert operations, fringe ideas, historical causation, political extremism, political paranoia, popular delusions, religious extremism, secret services, secret societies

We live in a credulous age, despite the unprecedented scientific and technological progress of the past half-century. As the new millennium begins, millions apparently continue to believe in the existence and terrestrial intervention of angels and daemons, alien abductions, murderous Satanist undergrounds, sinister cattle mutilations, mind control devices embedded in televisions, the Chupacabra, ritual Jewish baby-killing and blood-drinking, Vatican-sponsored 'crusades' against Islam and elaborate conspiracies of the most fantastic sort. In reaction to the ongoing proliferation of such bizarre and unfounded 'conspiracy theories', which has only increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001,¹ more

1 For representative examples from what has become a veritable cottage industry of recent books suggesting that someone other than al-Qā'ida was behind the 9/11

skeptical individuals have unfortunately sometimes moved too far in the other direction, so much so that they often deny the importance—if not the actual existence—of real clandestine and covert political activities.² If someone were to claim, for example, that it was necessary to counter ‘an alien organization that uses conspiratorial methods’, most educated people

attacks—most often the Bush administration itself and Israeli intelligence—or at least that Usāma b. Lādin’s network was aided and abetted by more powerful and sinister forces operating behind the scenes, see: Thierry Meyssan, *L’effroyable imposture: 11 September 2001* (Chatou: Carnot 2002); Thierry Meyssan, *Le Pentagate* (Chatou: Carnot 2003); Eric Hufschmid, *Painful Questions: An Analysis of the September 11th Attack* ([Laporte, CO]: Ink and Scribe 2002); Jim Marrs, *Inside Job: The Shocking Case for a 9/11 Conspiracy* (San Rafael, CA: Origin 2005); David Icke, *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster: Why the Official Story of 9/11 Is a Monumental Lie* (Wildwood, MO: Bridge of Love 2002); Arnold Schölzel (ed.), *Das Schweigekartell: Fragen und Widersprüche zum 11. September* (Berlin: Homilius 2002); Andreas von Bülow, *Die CIA und der 11. September* (Munich: Piper 2004); Maurizio Blondet, *11 settembre: colpo di stato in USA* (Milan: Effedieffe 2002); Maurizio Blondet, *Osama bin Mossad* (Milan: Effedieffe 2003); Bruno Cardeñosa, *11-S, historia de una infamia: las mentiras de la ‘versión oficial’* (Madrid: Corona Borealis 2003); and Robin de Ruiter, *11 settembre: il Reichstag di Bush* (Frankfurt: Zambon 2003). Recently, books have even appeared blaming the 11 March 2004 train bombings in Madrid on American machinations rather than on the jihadist cell that actually carried them out, even though the attack served to precipitate changes in Spanish government policy that were clearly unwelcome to the current US administration. See, for example, Bruno Cardeñosa, *11-M: claves de una conspiración* (Madrid: Espejo de Tinta 2004). What is surprising about all this is not that individual conspiracy theorists would rush forward to promote such nonsense, but that several of their books have subsequently become bestsellers. In part this is no doubt a reflection of the rampant anti-American and anti-Israeli attitudes that are so characteristic of the present era—concerning the latter, see Tobias Jaecker, *Antisemitische Verschwörungstheorien nach dem 11. September: Neue Varianten eines alten Deutungsmusters* (Münster: Lit 2005)—but it also indicates that all too many of today’s politically motivated readers are incapable of exercising sufficient critical judgement when it comes to assessing sources of information, no matter how controversial or flawed, that serve to reinforce their pre-existing biases and delusions. This is not meant to suggest, of course, that serious researchers should refrain from independently investigating and, if necessary, challenging problematic aspects of the ‘official’ version, either of the 9/11 operation or other recent terrorist attacks. For a standard, quasi-official account of the events leading up to the former, see *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 2004).

- 2 Although the terms ‘clandestine’ and ‘covert’ are often used interchangeably, technically they refer to different types of operations. According to former Office of Strategic Services and Central Intelligence Agency officer James McCargar, clandestine operations are ‘hidden but not disguised’, whereas covert operations are ‘disguised but not hidden’. See the very useful discussion in his pseudonymous book: Christopher Felix, *A Short Course in the Secret War* (New York: E. P. Dutton 1963), 27–9 (later editions of this classic work have recently been published). In this article the term ‘conspiratorial politics’ will be used to refer to secretive political activities in general, and might therefore encompass both clandestine and covert operations.

would probably raise their eyebrows and assume that they were in the presence of a nutty ‘conspiracy theorist’. In this instance, however, the phrase can be found in an official definition of counter-espionage provided by the Office of Special Operations (OSO) of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and was cited in a 1976 article by CIA counter-intelligence specialist William R. Johnson that appeared in the agency’s classified in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence*.³ Why should such a straightforward characterization automatically provoke so much skepticism among the intelligentsia?

Very few notions nowadays generate as much intellectual resistance, hostility and derision within academic circles as a belief in the historical importance or efficacy of political conspiracies. Even when this belief is expressed in a very cautious manner, limited to specific and restricted contexts, supported by reliable evidence and hedged about with all sorts of qualifications, apparently it still manages to transcend the boundaries of acceptable discourse and to violate unspoken academic taboos. The idea that particular groups of people meet together secretly or in private to plan various courses of action, and that some of these plans actually exert a significant influence on particular historical developments, is typically rejected out of hand and assumed to be the figment of a paranoid imagination. The mere mention of the word ‘conspiracy’ seems to set off an internal alarm bell that causes scholars to close their minds in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and possible unpleasantness, since the popular image of conspiracy both fundamentally challenges the conception most educated, sophisticated people have about how the world operates and reminds them of the horrible persecutions that absurd and unfounded conspiracy theories have precipitated or sustained in the past. So strong is this prejudice among academics that, even when clear evidence of a plot is inadvertently discovered in the course of their own research, they frequently feel compelled, either out of a sense of embarrassment or a desire to defuse anticipated criticism, to preface their account of it by ostentatiously disclaiming a belief in conspiracies.⁴ They then often attempt to downplay the significance of the plotting they have uncovered. To do

3 See William R. Johnson, ‘Clandestinity and current intelligence’, reprinted in H. Bradford Westerfield (ed.), *Inside CIA’s Private World: Declassified Articles from the Agency’s Internal Journal, 1955–1992* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1995), 131. Compare also the OSO’s definition of counter-intelligence (CI), which indicates that CI techniques ‘all have as their objective the frustration of the *active* efforts of alien conspiratorial organizations to acquire secret or sensitive information belonging to our government’ (ibid., 131–2).

4 Compare Robin Ramsay, ‘Conspiracy, conspiracy theories and conspiracy research’, *Lobster*, vol. 19, 1990, 25: ‘In intellectually respectable company it is necessary to preface any reference to actual political, economic, military or paramilitary conspiracies with the disclaimer that the speaker “doesn’t believe in the conspiracy theory of history (or politics).”’ This type of disclaimer itself reveals that such speakers are unable to distinguish between bona fide conspiracy theories and actual conspiratorial politics.

otherwise, that is, to make a serious effort to incorporate the documented activities of conspiratorial groups into their general political or historical analyses, would force them to stretch their mental horizons beyond customary bounds and, not infrequently, delve even further into certain sordid and politically sensitive topics. Most academic researchers clearly prefer to ignore the implications of conspiratorial politics altogether rather than deal directly with such controversial matters.

A number of complex cultural and historical factors contribute to this reflexive and unwarranted reaction, but it is perhaps most often the direct result of a simple failure to distinguish between 'conspiracy theories' in the strict sense of the term, which are essentially elaborate fables even though they may well be based on kernels of truth, and the activities of actual clandestine and covert political groups, which are a common feature of modern politics. For this and other reasons, serious research into genuine conspiratorial networks has at worst been suppressed, as a rule discouraged, and at best looked on with condescension by the academic community. An entire dimension of political history and contemporary politics has thus been consistently neglected.⁵ For decades scholars interested in politics have directed their attention towards explicating and evaluating the merits of various political theories, or analysing the more conventional, formal and overt aspects of practical politics. Even a cursory examination of standard social science bibliographies reveals that tens of thousands of books and articles have been written about staple subjects such as the structure and functioning of government bureaucracies, voting patterns and electoral results, parliamentary procedures and activities, party organizations and factions, the impact of constitutional provisions or laws, and the like. In marked contrast, only a handful of scholarly publications have been devoted to the general theme of political conspiracies—as opposed to popular anti-conspiracy treatises, which are numerous, and specific case studies of events in which conspiratorial groups have played some role—and virtually all of these concern themselves with the deleterious social impact of the 'paranoid

5 Complaints about this general academic neglect have often been made by those few scholars who have done research on key aspects of covert and clandestine politics that are directly relevant to this study. See, for example, Gary Marx, 'Thoughts on a neglected category of social movement participant: the agent provocateur and the informant', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 80, no. 2, September 1974, esp. 402–3. One of the few dissertations dealing directly with this topic, albeit in a somewhat oversimplified and overly polemical fashion, is Frederick A. Hoffman, 'Secret Roles and Provocation: Covert Operations in Movements for Social Change', Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979. There are, of course, some excellent academic studies that have likewise given due weight to these matters—for example, Nurit Schleifman, *Undercover Agents in the Russian Revolutionary Movement: The SR Party, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan/St Anthony's College 1988), and Jean-Paul Brunet, *La Police de l'ombre: indicateurs et provocateurs dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: Seuil 1990)—but they are unfortunately still few and far between.

style' of thought manifested in classic conspiracy theories rather than the characteristic features of real conspiratorial politics.⁶ Only the academic literature dealing with specialized topics like espionage, covert action, political corruption, organized crime, terrorism and revolutionary warfare

6 Some standard historically oriented academic treatments of conspiracy theories are Richard Hofstadter, 'The paranoid style in American politics', in Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf 1966), 3–40; Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* [1969] (Chico, CA: Scholars 1981); Olivier Dard, *La Synarchie: le mythe du complot permanent* (Paris: Perrin 1998); David Brion Davis (ed.), *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1971); J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London: Secker and Warburg 1972); Johannes Rogalla von Bieberstein, *Die These von der Verschwörung, 1776–1945: Philosophen, Freimaurer, Juden, Liberale und Sozialisten als Verschwörer gegen die Sozialordnung* (Frankfurt on Main: Peter Lang 1976); Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer 1987); Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner (ed.), *Geheimgesellschaften und der Mythos der Weltverschwörung* (Munich: Herder 1987); Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St Martin's 1995); Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: Free Press 1997); Eduard Eugenberger et al., *Weltverschwörungstheorien: die neue Gefahr von rechts* (Vienna: Deuticke 1998); Ute Caumanns and Mathias Niendorf, *Verschwörungstheorien: Anthropologische Konstanten, historische Varianten* (Osnabrück: Fibre 2001); Helmut Reinalter (ed.), *Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie—Geschichte—Wirkung* (Innsbruck: Studien 2002); and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003). Compare the currently fashionable 'cultural studies' analyses by Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: American Paranoia from Kennedy to the X-Files* (New York: Routledge 2001); Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: New York University Press 2002); and Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1998), which shed little or no light on real covert and clandestine operations. Works that straddle the above two categories (but are unfortunately much closer to the latter than the former) are George E. Marcus (ed.), *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999), and Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003). Finally, there are journalistic studies: two insightful sober works by George Johnson, *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* (Los Angeles: Tarcher 1983), and Ron Rosenbaum, *Travels with Dr Death and Other Unusual Investigations* (New York: Penguin 1991); as well as works by Jonathan Vankin, *Conspiracies, Cover-Ups, and Crimes: Political Manipulation and Mind Control in America* (New York: Paragon House 1992); Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, *The 80 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time: History's Biggest Mysteries, Coverups, and Cabals* (New York: Citadel 2004); Al Hidell and Joan d'Arc (eds), *The New Conspiracy Reader: From Planet X to the War on Terrorism—What You Really Don't Know* (New York: Citadel 2004) ('Al Hidell' was, not coincidentally, one of the aliases allegedly used by Lee Harvey Oswald); and Jon Ronson, *Them: Adventures with Extremists* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2003), which are more popular in their orientation, sensationalistic and/or condescending towards their subjects.

touches on clandestine and covert political activities on a more or less regular basis, probably because such activities cannot be avoided when dealing with these topics. But the analyses and information contained therein are rarely incorporated into standard works of history and social science, and much of that specialized literature is itself unsatisfactory.⁷ Hence there is an obvious need to place the study of conspiratorial politics on a sound theoretical, methodological and empirical footing, since ignoring the influence of such politics can lead to severe errors of historical interpretation.

This situation can only be remedied when a clear-cut analytical distinction has been made between classic conspiracy theories and the more limited conspiratorial activities that are a regular feature of politics. 'Conspiracy theories' share a number of distinguishing characteristics, but in all of them the essential element is a belief in the existence of a 'vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character', acts that aim to 'undermine and destroy a way of life'.⁸ Although this type of apocalyptic conception is nowadays generally peddled by political extremists, religious millenarians, technophobes and UFO buffs and is therefore regarded by respectable, 'right-thinking' people as the fantastic product of a paranoid mindset, in the past it was often accepted as an accurate description of reality by large numbers of people from all social strata, including intellectuals and heads of state.⁹ The fact that a belief in sinister, all-powerful conspiratorial forces has not typically been restricted to small groups of clinical paranoids and mental defectives suggests that it fulfils certain important social functions and psychological needs.¹⁰ First of all, like many other intellectual constructs,

7 One of the few historical overviews of revolutionary ideas and movements in modern Europe that has devoted sufficient attention to the important role played by secret societies, above all as a model for clandestine revolutionary organizations, is James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New York: Basic Books 1980), esp. 86–123.

8 See Hofstadter, 'The paranoid style', 14, 29.

9 Although conspiracy theories have been widely accepted in the most disparate eras and parts of the world, and thus probably have a certain universality as explanatory models, at certain points in time they have taken on an added salience due to particular historical circumstances. Their development and diffusion seems to be broadly correlated with the level of social, economic and political upheaval or change, though indigenous cultural values and intellectual traditions determine their specific form and condition their level of popularity.

10 As many scholars have pointed out, if such ideas were restricted to clinical paranoids, they would have little or no historical importance. What makes the conspiratorial or paranoid style of thought interesting and historically significant is that it frequently tempts more or less normal people and has often been diffused among broad sections of the population in certain periods. Conspiracy theories are important as collective delusions, delusions that nevertheless reflect real fears and real social problems, rather than as evidence of individual pathology. See, for example, Hofstadter, 'The paranoid style', 3–4.

conspiracy theories help to make complex patterns of cause and effect in human affairs more comprehensible by means of reductionism and oversimplification. Second, they purport to identify the underlying source of misery and injustice in the world, thereby accounting for current crises and upheavals and explaining why bad things are happening to good people or vice versa. Third, by personifying that source they paradoxically help people to reaffirm their own potential ability to control the course of future historical developments. After all, if evil conspirators are consciously causing undesirable changes, the implication is that others, perhaps through the adoption of similar techniques, may also consciously intervene to protect a threatened way of life or otherwise alter the historical process in positive ways. In short, a belief in conspiracy theories helps people to make sense out of a confusing, inhospitable reality, rationalize their present difficulties and partially assuage their feelings of powerlessness. In this sense, it is no different than any number of religious, social or political beliefs, and is deserving of the same serious study.

The image of conspiracies promoted by conspiracy theorists needs to be further illuminated before it can be contrasted with genuine conspiratorial politics. In the first place, conspiracy theorists consider the alleged conspirators to be Evil Incarnate. They are not simply people with differing values or run-of-the-mill political opponents, but inhuman, superhuman and/or anti-human beings who regularly commit abominable acts and are implacably attempting to subvert and destroy everything that is decent and worth preserving in the existing world. Thus, according to John Robison, the Bavarian Illuminati were formed 'for the express purpose of ROOTING OUT ALL THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS, AND OVERTURNING ALL THE EXISTING GOVERNMENTS IN EUROPE'.¹¹ This grandiose claim is fairly representative, in the sense that most conspiracy theorists view the world in similarly Manichaean and apocalyptic terms.

Second, conspiracy theorists perceive the conspiratorial group as both monolithic and unerring in the pursuit of its goals. This group is directed from a single conspiratorial centre, acting as a sort of general staff, which plans and coordinates all of its activities down to the last detail. Note, for example, Prince Clemens von Metternich's claim that a 'directing committee' of radicals from all over Europe had been established in Paris to pursue insidious plotting against established governments.¹² Given that

11 See his *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried On in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies, Collected from Good Authorities* (New York: G. Forman 1798), 14. This extract exhibits yet another characteristic of 'conspiracy theorists': the tendency to over-dramatize by using capital letters with reckless abandon.

12 See his 'Geheime Denkschrift über die Grundung eines Central-Comites der nordischen Mächte in Wien', in Richard Metternich-Winneburg (ed.), *Aus Metternichs nachgelassenen Papieren*, vol. 1 (Vienna: W. Braumüller 1881), 595, quoted in Rogalla von Bieberstein, *Die These von der Verschwörung*, 139–40.

presumption, it is no accident that many conspiracy theorists refer to 'the Conspiracy' rather than (lower-case) conspiracies or conspiratorial factions, since they perceive no internal divisions among the conspirators. Rather, as a group, the conspirators are believed to possess an extraordinary degree of internal solidarity, which produces a corresponding degree of counter solidarity *vis-à-vis* society at large. Indeed, it is this very cohesion and singleness of purpose that enables them to execute effectively their plans to destroy existing institutions, seize power and eliminate all opposition.

Third, conspiracy theorists believe that the conspiratorial group is omnipresent, at least within its own sphere of operations. While some conspiracy theories postulate a relatively localized group of conspirators, most depict this group as both international in its spatial dimensions and continuous in its temporal dimensions: 'the conspirators planned and carried out evil in the past, they are successfully active in the present, and they will triumph in the future if they are not disturbed in their plans by those with information about their sinister designs.'¹³ The conspiratorial group is therefore capable of operating virtually everywhere. As a consequence of this ubiquity, anything that occurs that has a broadly negative impact or seems in any way related to the purported aims of the conspirators can be plausibly attributed to them.

Fourth, the conspiratorial group is viewed by conspiracy theorists as virtually omnipotent. In the past this group has successfully overthrown empires and nations, corrupted whole societies and destroyed entire civilizations and cultures, and it is said to be in the process of accomplishing the same thing at this very moment. Its members are secretly working in every nook and cranny of society, and are making use of every subversive technique known to mankind to achieve their nefarious purposes. Nothing appears to be able to stand in their way—*unless* the warnings of the conspiracy theorists are heeded and acted upon at once. Even then there is no guarantee of ultimate victory against such powerful forces, but a failure to recognize the danger and take immediate countervailing action assures the success of those forces in the near future.

Finally, for conspiracy theorists, conspiracies are not simply a regular feature of politics whose importance varies in different historical contexts, but rather the motive force of all historical change and development. The

13 Dieter Groh, 'Temptation of conspiracy theory, part I', in Graumann and Moscovici (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, 3. A classic example of conspiratorial works that view modern revolutionary movements as little more than the latest manifestations of subversive forces with a very long historical pedigree is the influential book by Nesta H. Webster, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (London: Boswell 1924). For more on Webster's background, see the biographical study by Richard M. Gilman, *Behind World Revolution: The Strange Career of Nesta H. Webster* (Ann Arbor. MI: Insight 1982), of which only one volume has so far appeared; and Markku Ruotsila, 'Mrs Webster's religion: conspiracist extremism on the Christian far right', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 38, no. 2, June 2004, 109–26.

conspiratorial group can and does continually alter the course of history, invariably in negative and destructive ways, through conscious planning and direct intervention. Its members are not buffeted about by structural forces beyond their control and understanding, like everyone else, but are themselves capable of controlling events more or less at will. This supposed ability is usually attributed to some combination of daemonic influence or sponsorship, the possession of arcane knowledge, the mastery of sinister techniques and/or the creation of a preternaturally effective clandestine organization. As a result, unpleasant occurrences that are perceived by others to be the products of coincidence or chance are viewed by conspiracy theorists as further evidence of the secret workings of the conspiratorial group. For them, nothing that happens occurs by accident. Everything is the result of secret plotting in accordance with some sinister design.

This central characteristic of conspiracy theories has been aptly summed up by Donna Kossy in a popular book on fringe ideas:

Conspiracy theories are like black holes—they suck in everything that comes their way, regardless of content or origin... Everything you've ever known or experienced, no matter how 'meaningless,' once it contacts the conspiratorial universe, is enveloped by and cloaked in sinister significance. Once inside, the vortex gains in size and strength, sucking in everything you touch.¹⁴

As an example of this sort of mechanism, one has only to mention the so-called 'umbrella man', a man who opened up an umbrella on a sunny day in Dealey Plaza just as President John F. Kennedy's motorcade was passing. A number of 'conspiracy theorists' have assumed that this man was signalling to the assassins, thus tying a seemingly trivial and inconsequential act into the alleged plot to kill Kennedy.¹⁵ It is precisely this totalistic, all-encompassing quality that distinguishes 'conspiracy theories' from the secret but often mundane political planning that is carried out on a daily basis by all sorts of groups, both within and outside of government.

Thus real conspiratorial politics, although by definition hidden or disguised and often deleterious in their impact, simply do not correspond to the bleak, simplistic image propounded by conspiracy theorists. Far from embodying metaphysical evil, it is perfectly and recognizably human, with all the positive and negative characteristics and potentialities that this

14 Donna Kossy, *Kooks: A Guide to the Outer Limits of Human Belief* (Portland, OR: Feral House 1994), 191.

15 It should, however, be pointed out that even if the 'umbrella man' was wholly innocent of any involvement in a plot, as he almost certainly was, this does not necessarily mean that the Warren Commission's comforting official reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination is accurate. As always, the fact that certain parties continue to promote unfounded and absurd conspiratorial scenarios should not lead serious researchers to neglect problematic issues that have been ignored or glossed over in official accounts.

implies. At the most basic level, all the efforts of individuals to plan in private and initiate secret actions for their own perceived mutual benefit—in so far as these are intentionally withheld from outsiders and require the maintenance of secrecy for their success—are conspiracies.¹⁶ The Latin word *conspire* literally means ‘to breathe together’, and need not suggest anything more sinister than people getting together to hold a private meeting. Thus, every time officers of a company participate in a board meeting to plan a marketing strategy they are ‘conspiring’, and in this sense there are thousands of conspiracies occurring every single day.

Moreover, in contrast to the claims of conspiracy theorists, conspiratorial politics are anything but monolithic. At any given point in time, there are dozens if not hundreds of competitive political and economic groups engaging in secret planning and activities, and most are doing so in an effort to gain some advantage over their rivals. Such behind-the-scene operations are present on every level, from the mundane efforts of small-scale retailers to gain competitive advantage by being the first to develop new product lines to the crucially important attempts by rival secret services to penetrate and manipulate each other. Sometimes the patterns of these covert rivalries and struggles are relatively stable over time, whereas at other times they appear fluid and kaleidoscopic, as different groups secretly shift alliances and change tactics in accordance with their perceived interests. Even internally, within particular groups operating secretly, there are typically bitter disagreements between various factions over the specific courses of action to be adopted. Total uniformity of opinion and complete intragroup solidarity cannot be maintained perpetually in any human social organization, though the carrying out of ruthless periodic purges may temporarily contribute to that impression.

Furthermore, the operational sphere of particular conspiratorial groups is invariably restricted in time and space, though the precise extent of those temporal and spatial boundaries can vary quite widely. There is probably not a single secret organization anywhere that has existed continuously from antiquity to the present, and only a small number could have had a continuous existence for more than a century. And, with the possible exception of those that have been created and sponsored by the governments of major nations and the world’s most powerful business and religious institutions, the range of activity of specific conspiratorial groups is invariably limited to particular geographic or sectoral arenas.

Given these great disparities and divergences in range and power, it is obvious that actual conspiracies operate at varying levels of effectiveness. Although they are a typical facet of social and political life, in the overall scheme of things most conspiracies are narrow in scope, restricted in their

16 Compare Hofstadter, ‘The paranoid style’, 19: ‘All political behavior requires strategy, many strategic acts depend for their effect upon a period of secrecy, and anything that is secret may be described, often with little exaggeration, as conspiratorial.’

effects and of limited historical significance. But this is not always the case. It should be obvious that, whenever powerful political figures engage in secret planning, the impact of their decisions on others will be correspondingly greater and more difficult to counteract. Therefore, when such influential figures meet to hatch and coordinate plots, these plots may well have a disproportionate impact on the course of events, and hence a broader historical significance. There is nothing mysterious about this, however. It is simply a covert reflection of existing and sometimes readily visible power relations, and should be recognized as such.

Perhaps the easiest and quickest way to clarify the distinction between 'conspiracy theories' and genuine conspiracies is by reference to the notorious antisemitic tract, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This document, which purported to record the secret meetings of a conspiratorial Jewish leadership group whose aim was to take control over the world, has played a major role in stirring up fears of a Jewish conspiracy and catalysing repressive actions against Jewish communities throughout Europe and beyond since its appearance in the late nineteenth century. Even today, it continues to be cited by conspiracy mongers and antisemites of all stripes as proof that there is a secret Jewish cabal that is carefully planning and directing worldwide efforts to subvert and destroy all that is good or decent in the world. As such, it provides a perfect example of classic conspiracy theory literature, one that further exacerbated the 'paranoid style' of thinking already characteristic of many of its readers. Of course, as Norman Cohn and others have conclusively demonstrated, the text of the *Protocols* is not really what it purports to be. Yet, even though it is not ascribable to a hidden group of Jewish plotters, it is nonetheless the product of real conspiratorial politics, since it was forged by persons affiliated with the Tsarist secret police, the Okhrana. In short, it was produced at the behest of a genuine clandestine agency in order to fan antisemitism and otherwise exploit and manipulate popular fears.¹⁷

It is clear, then, that there are fundamental differences between 'conspiracy theories' and actual covert and clandestine politics, differences that must be taken into account if one wishes to avoid serious errors of historical interpretation. The problem is that most people, amateurs and professionals alike, consistently fail to distinguish between them. On the one hand, the

17 For an English translation of the actual text, see *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, trans. from the Russian by Victor E. Marsden (London: Britons Publishing Society 1933). For exposés and scholarly analyses, compare Benjamin W. Segal, *A Lie and a Libel: The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1995), which was originally published in Germany in 1926; Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*; Pierre-André Taguieff, *Les Protocoles des sages de Sion: faux et usages d'un faux* (Paris: Berg International/Fayard 2004); Pierre-André Taguieff, *Les Protocoles des sages de Sion, 2: études et documents* (Paris: Berg International 1992); and Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion* (Oxford: Oxford University 2003).

overwhelming majority of the self-appointed 'experts' who concern themselves with alleged conspiracies *are* in fact 'conspiracy theorists' in the negative sense outlined above. They seriously and passionately believe in the existence of vast, preternaturally effective conspiracies that successfully manipulate and control historical events behind the scenes, though they typically disagree vehemently with one another about exactly who is behind those conspiracies. This vocal lunatic fringe tends to discourage serious researchers from even investigating such matters, in part because the latter do not wish, understandably, to be tarred by the same soiled brush. In the process, however, most have unfortunately failed to heed the important qualification that Richard Hofstadter made in his analysis of the 'paranoid style' of political thinking, namely, that real conspiracies do exist, even though they do not conform to the elaborate and often bizarre scenarios concocted by conspiracy theorists.¹⁸ How, indeed, could it be otherwise in a world full of intelligence agencies, national security bureaucracies, clandestine revolutionary organizations, economic pressure groups, criminal cartels, secret societies with hidden agendas, deceptive religious cults, political front groups and the like?

There has never been, to be sure, a single, monolithic Communist Conspiracy of the sort postulated by the American John Birch Society in the 1950s and 1960s. Nor has there ever been an all-encompassing International Capitalist Conspiracy, a Jewish World Conspiracy, a Masonic Conspiracy or a Universal Vatican Conspiracy. And nowadays, contrary to the apparent belief of millions, neither a vast Underground Satanist Conspiracy nor an Alien Abduction Conspiracy exists. This reassuring knowledge should not, however, prompt anyone to throw out the baby with the bathwater, as many academics have been wont to do. For just as surely as none of the above-mentioned Grand Conspiracies has ever existed, diverse groups of communists, capitalists, Zionists, Freemasons and Catholics have in fact secretly plotted, often against one another, to accomplish various specific but limited political objectives. No sensible person would claim, for example, that the Soviet secret police was not involved in a vast array of covert operations throughout the decades-long existence of the Soviet Union, or that international front groups controlled by the Russian Communist Party did not systematically engage in worldwide penetration operations and propaganda campaigns. It is nonetheless true that scholars have often hastened to deny the existence of genuine conspiratorial plots, without making any effort whatsoever to investigate them, simply because such schemes fall outside their own realm of knowledge and experience or—even worse—directly challenge their sometimes naive conceptions about how the world functions.

18 Hofstadter, 'The paranoid style', 19: 'there *are* conspiratorial acts in history, and there is nothing paranoid about taking note of them' (emphasis in the original).

If certain parties were to say, for example, that a secret Masonic lodge in Italy had infiltrated all of the state's security agencies and was involved in promoting or at least exploiting acts of neo-fascist terrorism in order to help condition the political system and strengthen its own influence in the corridors of government, most readers would probably assume that that they were joking or accuse them of having taken leave of their senses. Twenty-five years ago this author might have had the very same reaction. Nevertheless, although the above statement greatly oversimplifies a far more complex pattern of interaction between the public and private spheres, not to mention between visible political institutions ('the overground' or 'the Establishment') and covert political groups ('the underground'), such a lodge did in fact exist. It was known as Loggia Massonica Propaganda Due (P2), was affiliated with the Grand Orient branch of Italian Freemasonry, and was headed by a former Fascist militiaman named Licio Gelli.¹⁹ In all probability smaller entities similar to P2 still exist today in an altered form, albeit not always promoting an authoritarian or rightist political agenda, even though that particular 'covered' lodge in Italy was officially outlawed in 1982. Likewise, if someone were to claim that an Afrikaner secret society founded in the early decades of this century had played a key role in promoting the system of apartheid in South Africa, and in the process helped to ensure the preservation of ultraconservative Afrikaner cultural values and Afrikaner political dominance until the early 1990s, some readers would undoubtedly believe that that person was exaggerating. Yet this organization also existed. It was known as the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB), and it formed a powerful 'state within a state' in that country by virtue, among other things, of its exercise of covert influence over elements of the security services.²⁰ There is no doubt that specialists in

19 For more on P2, see, above all, the materials published by the Italian parliamentary commission investigating the organization, which are divided into the majority (Anselmi) report, five dissenting minority reports and over one hundred thick volumes full of documents or verbatim testimony before the commission. See Parlamento, IX Legislatura, *Commissione d'inchiesta sulla loggia massonica P2* (Rome: Camera dei Deputati 1984–7). Compare also Martín Berger, *Historia de la logia masonica P2* (Buenos Aires: El Cid 1983); Andrea Barbieri et al., *L'Italia della P2* (Milan: Mondadori 1981); Alberto Cecchi, *Storia della P2* (Rome: Riuniti 1985); Roberto Fabiani, *I massoni in Italia* (Milan: L'Espresso 1978); Gianfranco Piazzesi, *Gelli: la carriera di un eroe di questa Italia* (Milan: Garzanti 1983); Marco Ramat et al., *La resistibile ascesa della P2: poteri occulti e stato democratico* (Bari: De Donato 1983); Renato Risaliti, *Licio Gelli, a carte scoperte* (Florence: Fernando Brancato 1991); and Gianni Rossi and Francesco Lombrassa, *In nome della 'loggia': le prove di come la massoneria segreta ha tentato di impadronirsi dello stato italiano. I retroscena della P2* (Rome: Napoleone 1981). Pro-P2 works include those by Gelli supporter Pier Carpi, *Il caso Gelli: la verità sulla loggia P2* (Bologna: INEI 1982), and the truly Orwellian work by Gelli himself, *La verità* (Lugano: Demetra 1989), which in spite of its title bears little resemblance to the truth.

20 For the AB, see Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball 1978); and J. H. P. Serfontein,

late twentieth-century Italian politics who fail to take account of the activities of P2, like experts on South Africa during the period of Afrikaner domination who ignore the AB, are missing an important dimension of political life in those countries at particular historical junctures. Nevertheless, neither of these two important organizations has been thoroughly investigated by academics. In these instances, as is so often the case, investigative journalists have done most of the truly groundbreaking preliminary research.

The above remarks should not be misconstrued. They are in no way meant to suggest that conspiratorial groups are the propulsive force of most historical change or that they alone are capable of controlling our destiny, as legions of 'conspiracy theorists' would have us believe. For one thing, no group of individuals has that capability, no matter how powerful they are. Fortunately for the rest of us, even powerful human beings are inherently flawed creatures who regularly commit errors of judgement and other sorts of blunders. They have not only to cope with the formidable problem of unforeseen and unintended consequences, but also to contend with other powerful groups that are likewise vying for influence, broader social forces that are difficult if not impossible to control and deep-rooted structural and cultural constraints that place limits on how much they are able to accomplish. Moreover, to attribute that degree of power and influence to secret conspirators would be to commit what David Hackett Fischer has dubbed the 'furtive fallacy', that is, to embrace the idea that everything that is truly significant happens behind the scenes. On the other hand, Fischer may go too far in the other direction by inadvertently implying that only that which is above board is worth considering and that nothing that happens in the shadows has real significance.²¹ To accept those unstated propositions uncritically could induce a person, among other things, to overlook the bitter nineteenth-century struggle between political secret societies (or, at least, between revolutionaries using non-political secret societies as a 'cover') and the political police of powerful states like Austria and Russia, to minimize the role played by revolutionary vanguard parties in the Russian, Nazi and Communist Chinese revolutions, or to deny that powerful intelligence services like the CIA and the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (KGB) fomented coups and otherwise intervened extensively in the internal affairs of other sovereign states during

Brotherhood of Power: An Exposé of the Secret Afrikaner Broederbond (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1978). Compare also B. M. Schoeman, *Die Broederbond in die Afrikaner-politiek* (Pretoria: Aktuele 1982), and Adrien Pelzer, *Die Afrikaner-Broederbond: Eerste 50 jaar* (Cape Town: Tafelberg 1979). More generally, see T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1975).

21 See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row 1970), 74–8.

the Cold War. In short, it might well lead to the misinterpretation or falsification of history on a grand scale.

It is easier to recognize such dangers when relatively well-known historical developments like these are used as illustrative examples, but problems often arise when the possible role played by conspiratorial groups in more obscure events is brought up. It is above all in these cases, as well as in high-profile cases where a comforting 'official' version of events has been widely diffused, that commonplace academic prejudices against taking conspiratorial politics seriously come into play and can exert a potentially detrimental effect on historical judgements. There is probably no way to prevent this sort of unconscious reaction in the current intellectual climate, but the least that can be expected of serious scholars is that they carefully examine the available evidence before dismissing these matters out of hand. Just because a host of bizarre, all-encompassing conspiracy theories continue to be peddled by political and religious extremists, ranging from the far right across the entire political spectrum to the far left, does not mean that academics can afford to blithely ignore or systematically minimize the importance of certain 'really existing' covert and clandestine operations.

Researchers do, of course, face certain peculiarly difficult methodological problems when they attempt to study such operations, which by definition are meant to be concealed from public scrutiny. Most of these problems derive from a lack of adequate documentation and/or the profusion of biased, sensationalistic sources of uncertain or obviously contaminated provenance. Yet these problems are not necessarily insurmountable. For one thing, a fortuitous combination of human blunders, factional infighting that generates information leaks and the onset of unanticipated historical events—for example, the leftist military coup in Portugal in 1974 that led to the discovery of the archives of the Portuguese secret police, the revolution in Iran that led to the seizure of documents at the American embassy in Tehran, and the collapse of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe that resulted in the opening of various Soviet-era archives²²—sometimes leads to the unearthing of pre-

22 For the discovery of a wealth of important materials in the Portuguese secret police archives, including documents concerning Aginter Presse, an international right-wing intelligence and paramilitary network involved in terrorist actions that operated under the cover of a seemingly innocuous press agency, see Frédéric Laurent, *L'Orchestre noir* (Paris: Stock 1978), and Fabrizio Calvi and Frederic Laurent, *Piazza Fontana: la verità su una strage* (Milan: Mondadori 1997), 60–121. For the corpus of secret documents found at the American embassy in Tehran, many of which were later published by the Iranian revolutionary regime, see the multi-volume series entitled *Asnād-i lānah-i jāsūsī-i Amrikā* (Documents from the US Espionage Den) (Qum: Daftar-i Intishārāt-i Islāmī 1981–). For the analysis of various materials found in the newly opened Soviet archives, see the ongoing series of publications produced by the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; see the Wilson Center's website at www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.home (viewed 26 October 2006).

viously unknown or untapped source materials that belatedly permit outsiders to examine illustrative cases of such activities. For another, the rigorous techniques of primary and secondary source criticism that have long been employed with success by serious historians are in fact very well suited for analysing the sort of fragmentary bits of information that periodically surface in connection with actual cases of conspiratorial politics.

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