

Conspiracy Theories

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My Reading Habits

Along about 1983 or so, when I was still imprinting on Monty Python and that sort of thing, I discovered the *Illuminatus!* trilogy. Perhaps you've heard of this, and perhaps you understand why I became delighted with conspiracy theory as a form of entertainment. To this day I think Evil Sinister Mind Control Plots are *funny*. I hope I can share this kind of funny with you.

Of course conspiracy theory goes back a long way; people who express such theories are generally Dead Serious about them; and there are any number of claims of conspiracies, about almost any people or institutions you can name. Like science fiction, or lost-civilization stories, or contemporary cults, or UFO stories, conspiracy theories express some preoccupations that people tend to have, in a particular time and place. It might actually be constructive to survey contemporary conspiracy theories in that light, as warnings against some seductive mistakes in thinking.

Types of Conspiracy Theory

It says something about our culture that the major conspiracy theories used to revolve around religious denominations, or fantasies; and nowadays, the major ones revolve around political conspiracies, or superficially science-fictional fantasies. I'll take just a few examples to illustrate these varieties.

Religious Conspiracies, Beginning with Those Crazy Knights Templar

Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* – which at first I took for a send-up of cultists and occultism – puzzled me by the comment: "and sooner or later [lunatics] all start talking about the Templars." Since I discovered the novel, I have found out what he meant: at least in Europe, and now across the world, the sort of mythological role played by the Illuminati has also been filled by the Templars.

Who were the Knights Templar, really? Back in the Middle Ages, some European knights in Judea founded yet another order of military monks. For whatever reasons, they evolved quickly into a powerful, wealthy and far-reaching organization, with land holdings and even banking concerns over most of the known world. Perhaps inevitably, they became arrogant and

became players in power politics, to the point where their apparent civility to Moslem authorities was Viewed With Suspicion back in Europe.

The reason only a few people rant about the Templars today, or even hear about them, is that they were officially destroyed and disbanded after the last Crusades. This had less to do with the Knights Templar no longer having a foothold in Jerusalem, and more to do with the King of France and the Church in Rome coveting the Templars' power, or wealth, or both. In the last ten or twenty years, as New Age and conspiracy theories have gained greater visibility and market share, the Templars have been hauled out again. I think.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

This nasty piece of tripe deserves little space. I'll just say here that the *Protocols* were a deliberate fabrication by Pyotr Rachkovsky, a 19th-century Russian intelligence chief; he plagiarized passages from a couple of novels to attribute a plot for world domination to a non-existent Jewish cabal, chiefly as a pretext for a Russian-Western European intelligence and military alliance.

The end result is that this scurrilous little pamphlet took on a life of its own, far outliving the specific disinformation task. Anti-Semites keep reprinting the *Protocols*, even when the origin of the hoax is exposed. I guess the will to believe is a powerful force.

Holy Blood, Holy Grail, The Committee to Protect the Rights and Privileges of Low Cost Housing a.k.a. Priory of Sion, etc., etc.

This is a rather curious story. The first element is a story – and I don't know what you'll make of this – that a certain famous first-century lay preacher did not in fact die in Judea in A.D. 33, but survived by subterfuge, and indeed founded a family that endured in southern France. Another element is a rumour based on the fact that royalty and aristocracy in Europe essentially formed one large family, dedicated to conserving wealth and power. The rumour has it that the thugs, I mean, aristocrats descended from the (ahem) Judean line claimed literally divine descent. The second-to-last element is a claim that these pogues are organized, their organization is the "Priory of Sion", and the Priory now does business as an organization in Paris called "The Committee to Protect the Rights and Privileges of Low Cost Housing."

Ho-hum, yawn. I mean, in this day and age, who really cares? For one thing, if you think about it, a rabbi who survived crucifixion is, so far, not Jesus Christ the Supernatural Saviour. If that matters to you. For another thing ... I sometimes joke that the suburbs of Canada are full of families who used to be minor European nobility, but in polite Canadian society, we don't talk about these origins. It brings down the property values.

Evidently, though, a fair-sized reading public gives some cachet to European aristocracy. Baigent and Leigh's *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* made respectable mass-market sales, even in hardback, before the paperback release.

Political Conspiracies, e.g. The Ancient and Illuminated Seers of Bavaria

There is a dimension beyond the Kennedy and King assassinations, or the Watergate conspiracy, or the alleged Jack-the-Ripper murders. Of course I am speaking of the Bavarian Illuminati, alleged to this day to be working on world domination.

By about the 1960s, a number of conspiracy allegations were leveled at public, private, political and religious institutions. Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson were editors at *Playboy* magazine at the time, and correspondents sometimes wrote in claiming persecution by one or another institution; they received help, if they merited it, from the Playboy Foundation. But there were always a number of letters that came in claiming that fluoridating water led to mind control, or that sex education was a godless Commie plot, etc., etc. Some conspiracy claims were much more far out. And some of the writers tended to group every conspiracy they perceived into One Big Plot, attributed to the Illuminati.

Who were the Illuminati, really? As a matter of historical record, the Bavarian Illuminati were founded by a hacked-off radical professor at the University of Ingolstadt, back in the years before the American Revolution. There have been conflicting claims and counterclaims as to what Adam Weishaupt and the Illuminati were, and intended, and did; but it seems to be established that they infiltrated Freemason lodges across Europe, tried to create a covert power structure, and intended to subvert and displace the existing structures, represented by feudal states and the late-medieval Church. It also seems to be established that the states and the Church quashed the Illuminati, and turned against secret societies generally, when an Illuminati courier died and his papers were recovered.

If you regard conspiracy theories as a contemporary form of myth, then the Illuminati entered the realm of myth as soon as someone asserted they weren't dead. (And not even resting, yes.) Somebody named Robison published a book, a little after the American Revolution, titled *Proofs of a Conspiracy*; his notion was that the Freemasons had never shaken loose of Illuminati direction, and were in fact infiltrating all countries everywhere, they were forming a world-wide covert power structure. Probably this explains a few peculiar things that developed subsequently in American politics, such as the Anti-Masonic Party.

What the two Roberts at *Playboy* found was that, every generation or so, somebody takes the myth of the Illuminati, adds their favourite pet peeves to the stew, and expands on the previous body of myth, I mean, conspiracy theory.

The latest turn taken by this developing mythology – at least, the spin put on it by one Fritz Springmeier, in *Bloodlines of the Illuminati* – maintains essentially that the super-rich of the world form an international subculture, an actual Illuminati organization, not only working for their own enrichment and power, not only working against the general good of the world's population, but actually directed personally by a literal, physical Satan.

Science Fictional Threats, e.g. UFOs

Almost any technology or industry today can be the subject of a conspiracy theory – germ dissemination, or biochemical and chemical weapons, or inept nuclear technology; mind control techniques; most recently, genetic engineering – all of which have documentably been tested by Western governments on unoffending, uninformed Western civilians. But the most spectacular theories tend to centre around alien visitors from other planets.

There are a number of conspiracy theories relating to alleged government cover-ups of encounters with alien beings. From the Roswell incident to this date, these allegations tend to ignore contemporary political and military tensions, the background against which UFO flaps take place; especially, they ignore the natural unwillingness of authorities to admit there are things they don't know, don't understand, and don't control.

A radio interviewer in Victoria, doing a show with members of a local SF club, once asked me what I believed about UFOs. I was boggled; I had never considered the matter and thought it was completely out of left field. I think I stammered something about the out-of-context experiences related by alleged UFO abductees representing some phenomenon that has to do with geomagnetism, and the effects that electromagnetic induction can have on the human brain. But I don't suppose the interviewer or his listeners got the idea.

The theory I had heard about, which is advanced by parapsychologist Susan Blackmore, and by Michael Persinger of Laurentian University, is that an abduction experience is, at least, temporal lobe epilepsy. The high incidence of UFO experiences near tectonically active areas, or by people who have experienced electrocution; or the points of similarity that abduction experiences have with classical nightmares, and sleep paralysis, are all kind of suggestive.

Granted, this hypothesis doesn't cover any physical evidence, at least on the order of radiation burns a man suffered in the Ontario bush or the alleged implants which laboratories have failed to assay.

So we have a mystery; meaning, something that refuses to make sense.

The usual mistakes of conspiracy theories

I told you all the foregoing in order to tell you this:

Mistake no. 1: They ain't no One Big Plot anywhere.

When the two Roberts teamed up and wrote the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, lampooning the wildest of the conspiracy theories they received, they made what I consider a cunning observation: that if all the conspiracy theories were true, then different arms of the same worldwide Illuminati organization periodically are at war with each other. It is far simpler, they implied, to suppose that there are a number of conspiratorial movements at any given time, at least some of which are aware of each other and working against each other.

Mistake no. 2: Dramatizing a conspiracy theory with alleged lines of descent, supernatural powers, or allegedly religious issues does not strengthen a case.

Dragging in your particular religion does not strengthen an essentially non-religious issue. Doesn't even make it important, really, to most audiences in a contemporary, multicultural environment. This is to say, the paranoid preoccupations of some conspiracy theorists in industrialized countries, most of whom come from Judeo-Christian backgrounds, must seem foreign or quaint to people from other backgrounds. Buddhist or Hindu or Shinto backgrounds, for instance; let alone animists in Africa and South America. I am speaking, of course, about the vast majority of humanity.

Mistake no. 3: Do not attribute to cover-up what may just be institutional embarrassment.

Has no-one else observed that, whatever else can be said about UFO encounters, their only consistency is that *they don't really make sense?*

Better reasoning

My conclusions should be obvious by now, but let me summarize, just so it's all in plain English.

There are a few well-documented, carefully reasoned conspiracy theories. Some of the various theories about the Kennedy assassinations are examples.

But there are also badly-documented, ill-reasoned conspiracy theories. You have to wonder what motivates the people who conceive and purvey them.

- There is a right way and a wrong way to read historical evidence. Many conspiracy theorists do it the wrong way, which boils down essentially to jumping to conclusions. In a nutshell: *You cannot leap from an unfounded speculation to a foregone conclusion*; and, *Not all groups working to a common purpose amount to conspiracies*. Even when such groups meet and act in secrecy, as Bilderbergs, Davos, and World Trade Organization meetings do, they do not necessarily constitute a conspiracy (Although I will harbour questions about any group that does so).
- Stipulating for the sake of argument that there are conspiracies among us... even, according to Leary, the same dozen conspiracies, in any place and time...we can console ourselves with the thought that they mostly cancel each other out.
- There are dictionary, and legal, definitions of conspiracy. Many conspiracy theories do not meet those definitions.
- Conspiracy theories often lack a “smoking gun”; however circumstantial and well-researched, by criminal, legal, forensic and financial criteria ... they often lack hard evidence that will support a class-action suit. Which is what it would take, to bring actual powerful conspirators to book.
- Claiming that the lack of evidence proves there must be a conspiracy, hiding their tracks, doesn't impress anybody, and neither should it.
- Many of these theories are extreme dramas, like crank theories, lost-civilization histories, and UFO stories. But no amount of dramatic storytelling will serve in the place of conclusive, legally admissible evidence. In fact, it leads me to suspect the motives and reasoning of conspiracy theorists.
- World domination? One word: *paperwork*.

In the end, I suppose my sense of basic security is reassured by Michael Flynn's novel *In the Country of the Blind*. For reasons which apply to us all – the sheer passage of time, and consequent changes in a group's objects; the inherent limits on the size of groups with a unified, common purpose; the consequent limits to their power and influence; and the sheer cussedness of the universe, in which the effects of our actions may nothing to do with our intent –conspiracies will be short-lived, multiple, limited in the mark they can make, and working at cross-purposes.

Sort of like conrunning, isn't it?

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Webster, Nesta. *World Revolution*. London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1921.

A conspiracy theory may take any matter as its subject, but certain subjects attract greater interest than others. Favored subjects include famous deaths, government activities, new technologies, terrorism and questions of alien life. Among the longest-standing and most widely recognized conspiracy theories are notions concerning the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 1969 Apollo moon landings. A man obsessed with conspiracy theories becomes a target after one of his theories turns out to be true. Unfortunately, in order to save himself, he has to figure out which theory it is. Director: Richard Donner. She works for the government. Fletcher is an outspoken critic of that government. He has conspiracy theories for everything, from aliens to political assassinations. But soon, one of his theories finds itself to be accurate. But which one? A conspiracy theory is an attempt to explain a perceived real-world occurrence through the actions of a secretive, usually evil and very selfish group. Not all conspiracy theories are wrong, but if the theory requires greater suspension of disbelief than random chance would to explain the occurrence, it should be examined skeptically. Conspiracies manifest themselves across the political spectrum. Most of the theories in the list below are crackpot, but a few, sadly, are reasonable and a couple are