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Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory – A Brief Introduction to DARK POWERS

Conspiracies have haunted our political and historical imaginary since antiquity. In them we find a secret dimension of politics with unpredictable alliances, invisible networks, and hidden agents. Conspiracies – both real ones and phantasms - open up questions about what constitutes the mechanisms of power, its secret, dark side. What is a conspiracy? In criminal law, a conspiracy is defined as „an agreement between two or more natural persons to break the law at some time in the future“. The essential components, thus, of a conspiracy, are thus two things: a group and a plan. „First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin“, as the Leonard Cohen song goes, and to start with, I would like to put the emphasis on the „we“. Who is this “we”? Investigating historical plots and cabals, but also envisioning – as conspiracy theory does – the machinations of hidden agents and groups, in short: thinking about conspiracies always means thinking about groups. Who are the members of this these clandestine groups? How can they be recognized? What is it that binds them and keeps them together? What is the specific nature of the oath or the spirit of a conspiracy, that is etymologically at the root of the Latin words „conjuratio“ or „conspiratio“? The type of group formed by a conspiracy implies that, while membership in this group is highly exclusive, it is also invisible. No outsider may know who the members of the club are, what distinguishes the conspiracy as a political agency from other other groups with agendas such as political parties or commercial firms.

Conspiracies are the dark side of social bonding, the dark side of power and of political activity, they are that which must not and cannot come under public scrutiny, that which cannot be legitimized and therefore have to resort to the veil of secrecy. „Oh conspiracy“, says Shakespeare’s Brutus, „Sham’st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,/When evils are most free“. The secretiveness of the

conspiratorial group seems to be, even in the view of the conspirators, evidence of its criminal intentions. A mechanism, that in turn, casts a strong shadow of suspiciousness over any organization that operates with a certain amount of secrecy, whether it be the rather innocuous Freemasons or the rarely innocuous Secret Services.

What is it, then, that keeps the group together, beyond formal oaths, strange rituals, or even, — as Machiavelli recommends for efficient conspiracies — a certain amount of coercion by the conspiracy's masterminds? What really keeps the conspiratorial group together is an (epistemo)logical principle: the sharing of a secret. For a secret, as Louis Marin explained, is something essentially social, and implies at least three "players". A secret can be defined as the exclusive knowledge that A shares with B against C. A secret that is only locked into a single mind, that is not at least virtually "shareable", is none at all. A conspiracy is thus a group that not only revolves around, but is essentially constituted by the secret that keeps it together and serves as threshold between the group and the rest of the world, the very distinction between outsiders and insiders. This secret therefore is something like the empty center of a conspiracy; whether it may consist in a diabolic plot to seize world power, or, as in the case of eighteenth century secret societies, in not much more its list of members. The secret's main function is that of a mere marker, a gate mechanism of inclusion and exclusion.

Given this crucial separation between the insider and the outsider position, any kind of talking, speculating, narrating, and even theorizing about conspiracies is always and by definition limited to the position of the outsider. "If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. "Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts". A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not," writes DeLillo in *Libra*. The outsider position with its limited knowledge is a position that unavoidably produces phantasms and projections: the phantasm of a flawlessly frictionless, unthwartable plan, of irresistibly powerful techniques and media of manipulation, and of an absolutely hermetic and

cohesive cast of conspirators. Conspiracies, no matter how “real” or “imagined” they might be, can only be explored or narrated from an outsider position – and this is why one cannot always entirely separate, in our opinion, conspiracies as an object of research or of narrative from the esoteric speculation of conspiracy theory.

How, then, can a conspiracy be narrated? How can its intrigue - whether as a past event or as a future scheme - be charted in a coherent sequence of intentions, acts, and events? This is exactly the question imposed both on the novelists and the historiographers of conspiracies. How, in other words, does the complot become a plot? It can become a plot only by endowing the conspiracy with the hallmark of perfection which DeLillo ascribes to the viewpoint of the outsider. “A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. ... We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle.” The conspiracy is the inversion, the sublimation of bad luck, happenstance, mistakes, the flaws and incoherences of everyday life. And so is the narrative, whether historical or fictional, that represents the conspiratorial intention as a coherent foolproof plan. Its apparent coherence is an effect of narrative arrangement: a sequence in time, an agent, a goal.

The question a historian, as much as a reader of fiction has to answer, is: who is telling me this? What kind of story is this? From what elements, documentary or fictional or even forged, is this story elaborated? And what is the vantage point, or even the vested interest of a source, a text, a narrative? When, for instance, Sallust tells the lurid story of the Catilinarian conspiracy, he emphasizes his retirement from politics to underline the neutrality of his account, even though this account is highly biased in favor of the targets of Catilina’s foiled coup d’état. The Catilinarian conspiracy is perhaps the first example of a conspiracy that is practically impossible to research from a different angle than the one suggested by the victors, Catilina’s enemies. And, as we know, things have not gotten all that much better with more bodies of extensive evidence, more eyewitness

accounts, and more media coverage. The twentieth century has been flooded with conspiracies from the Bolshevik revolution to the Reichstag fire and the Warren Commission up to the present day. Any account of conspiracy is always a highly politicized tale, an interested and distorted version of a truth that can never be fully brought to light as such. How do we confront such an account? One strategy is to dismantle the conspiracy narrative, whether with more and contrafactual evidence or with alternative versions that make the coherence inhoherent. It means reading between the lines, reading in the gaps left in the all too convincing tales we are told. We need not only ask about the slant of any account, but we must also be mistrusting about the nature of the facts on which they rely and distrust the facts themselves. The more facts, the more bodies of evidence, the more witnesses – the more unreliable these become. Instead of corroborating one plausible hypothesis, they tend to discredit one another, opening up an abyss of uncertainty and distrust. This is what, after the JFK assassination, DeLillo called a “natural disaster in the heartland of the real” the overwhelming feeling that facts, proofs and elements of reality suddenly started to appear as strange inventions, as fictions. Another way to respond to this fictionalization of reality might be to blur or artfully mingle the genres of historiography and fiction, to fictionalize history by constantly being aware of the fact that there is no direct grip on the “real facts”. The question we would therefore like to ask is whether any account or description of conspiracy can escape being fiction. Being aware that one is writing fiction while dealing with conspiracies would imply the author’s awareness of the fact that he can never reach a firm position of definite truth, but only offer one (or even several) possible, plausible versions of what might have happened.

What is behind conspiracy theory? It is one of the most powerful genres of such fiction, a fiction that is devoid of any insight into its own fictionality. Conspiracy theories take the opacity of reality as a point of departure to venture on an alternative interpretation about the order of things. Conspiracy theories are variations on the theme of an ever less graspable political and social reality that

seems to constangly withdraw from our grip. They seem to offer plausible explanations as to why, as Dieter Groh put it, “bad things happen to good people”, by simplistically indicating one supreme secretly operating agency.

One way of investigating the infinite number of motives and types of conspiracy theory – from the Judeo-Masonic-Marxist conspiracy and the ever popular Jewish world conspiracy to the “invisible government” of the Sixties or the Bush-Bin Laden connection, is a taxonomy of different types or structures of conspiracy theories. On the one hand, we have mono-causal conspiracies, ascribing total power to one single agent, the most prominent of them being the Jewish world conspiracy, and we have, on the other hand, models of entangled networks, such as the Bush-Bin Laden connection or the nineteenth century accounts of various secret societies cooperating to organize the French Revolution. We have conspiratorial actors that frame the entire world, as in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Illuminati or the Trilateral Commission, or, on the other hand, relatively plausible conspiracies such as the Kennedy assassination or the omnipresent economical network of the Carlyle group.

Aside from such a typological approach to conspiracy theory we would like to suggest an analysis of their specific style of thought. Conspiracy theories can be seen as a form of political thinking, as a “paranoid style”, in Richard Hofstadter’s famous term. They are a way of making order out of disorder, of connecting the dots, of interpreting the world and trying to situate oneself in it. According to Timothy Melley, “paranoia is an interpretive disorder” that revolves around questions of control and manipulation”. Looking at the eclectic concoctions, at the bizarre systems and conclusions of conspiracy theories, one is certainly tempted to see in them nothing but a disorder, the pathology of a disoriented spirit. This is why conspiracy theory has often been seen as a certain type of ideology, an attempt to attribute the instance of agency in an overly complex modern or postmodern society to one superior, evil and hidden agent. Fredric Jameson somewhat condescendingly called conspiracy theory the “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic

of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system". The broad interest taken by Cultural Studies in popular conspiracy theories mostly adopted Jameson's view, and regards them as the wrong answers to the right questions. Showing the symptoms of disorientation and loss of social transparency, conspiracy theorists are seen as the disenfranchised „poor in spirit“, who, for lack of a real understanding of the world they live in, come up with paranoid systems of world explanation.

What we would like to suggest, however, is taking conspiracy theories seriously. The so-called „paranoid style“ essentially consists not so much in giving answers but first and foremost in asking questions. Instead of regarding conspiracy theories as ideologies and debunking them with the attitude of „Ideologiekritik“, it might be worth while analyzing them as what they are at first sight: systems that reorganize political, social and scientific knowledge. Their political and social insight may not lie in the answers they give but in the questions they legitimately ask. Conspiracy theories are inspired by an attitude of distrust towards authorities, of scepticism towards official truths and of an attention paid to conspicuous details. Conspiracy theory is a form of popular discourse on modernity's *arcana imperii*, perhaps the only powerful way of questioning the secrets of the State today. Conspiracy theories have to be taken seriously as a mode and a model of critical political thinking. Why and under which circumstances have conspiracy theories been successful and convincing? What are their social and political functions?

This means first of all to take a closer look at their epistemological structure. Conspiracy theories often build around specific types of highly treasured, classified knowledge, such as the „secret of the atom bomb“ that was suspected to have been stolen by Communist spies, such as the notorious research on „Mind Control“ or the never publicized findings in the investigation of John F. Kennedy's murder. Conspiracy theories have to be seen as the symptom of an epistemological crisis in the realm of state secrets. They indicate possible worst case scenarios in the use and abuse of secret knowledge – and therein, we

contend, lies their essential lucidity. What we would like to investigate with you is not only the epistemological structure of conspiracy theory, their inextricably entangled dialectics of blindness and insight. How do they re-arrange the bits and bites of knowledge they can get hold of? What is the specific nature of their curiosity? We also think it is necessary discussing what we would like to call the “ethics of conspiracy theory”: What is their social impact, and what are their effects on current political discourse? What is “behind” conspiracy theory? – And last not least we would like to ask: Is there anything we can learn from conspiracy theories?