"Getting Conspiratorial"

Review of: Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-files by Peter Knight

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Peter Knight begins his foray into the conspiratorial corners of popular culture with the following provocation: conspiracy theories are no longer the "delusional rantings" of the fringe elements in society, but rather constitute "many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works." Conspiracy theories, in his view, reflect a general skepticism of governmental authority, covert actions, "official" versions of history, and, more broadly, express a philosophical anxiety about agency and causality in these postmodern, poststructural times—and he argues that this skepticism is largely justified. In taking this position, he is placing himself at odds with two recent books: Robert Robins and Jerrold Post's *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (1997) and Elaine Showalter's *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), both of which maintain that conspiracies are dangerous misconceptions to be debunked. Knight wants to play devil's advocate to the claim that conspiracy theories are essentially flawed (at best), or politically destabilizing and dangerous (at worst), and elevate the term "conspiracy" from its pejorative connotation to a form of constructive insight into the perils and uncertainties of contemporary life.

One major frustration of the book is that Knight never provides a definition of what a conspiracy is. According to Webster's dictionary, a conspiracy is either a plan to harm or destroy another person or group, or the group of people who are behind this harmful, destructive plan. These first two definitions are instances of a "literal" conspiracy, one in which there is a clear notion of intention and agency. The third definition, however, is murkier: a conspiracy is "a striking concurrence of tendencies, circumstances or phenomena *as though* in planned accord." Without motivation or agency, "conspiracy" suddenly takes on an unreal, metaphorical dimension. If we say that someone sees conspiracies everywhere, we are not paying that person a compliment.

But in Knight's analysis, conspiracies do appear ubiquitous, as is evidenced from the following impressive list of acronyms and ideas he references, which I abbreviate here: JFK, RFK, MLK, Malcolm X, Marilyn Monroe, MK-ULTRA, Operation Paperclip, Phoenix, Mongoose, Majestic-12, COINTELPRO, Sirhan Sirhan, LSD, MIA, CIA, FBI, NSA, Secret Service, Roswell, Area 51, Tuskegee, Jonestown, Chappaquiddick, Waco, Oklahoma, Watergate, Iran-Contra, October Surprise, Savings & Loan, Whitewater, Lockerbie, TWA Flight 800, O.J., Ebola, AIDS, crack cocaine, black helicopters, gray aliens, magic bullet, lone nut. Not to mention the numerous books, television shows, and films that overtly thematize conspiracies: *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990, all by Pynchon), *Libra* (1988), *Underworld* (1997—all by DeLillo), *The X-Files* (Carter 1993), *The Prisoner* (Asher 1967), *The Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer 1962), *The Parallax View* (Pakula 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (Pollack 1975), *All the President's Men* (Pakula 1976), *The Net* (Winkler 1995), *Strange Days* (Bigelow 1995), *JFK* (Stone 1991), and, obviously, *Conspiracy Theory* (Donner 1997). By the end of the book, you begin to feel that he is on to something.

Richard Hofstadter's essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," required reading for anyone interested in the history of conspiracy in America, is the jumping off point for Knight's own thesis. In order to appreciate where Knight is going in this debate, we need to understand how the term "conspiracy" entered American popular culture, and Hofstadter is the logical place to start. Citing the anti-Masonic movement of the 1830s, the anti-Catholic movement, anti-Semitism, and McCarthyism, Hofstadter is very clear about the fact that he considers the "paranoid style" of rhetoric a form of "political pathology," which is unequivocally a bad thing. Or is it? Are there real conspiracies out there that we should legitimately be worried about? Knight observes that all of Hofstadter's examples are right-wing groups or fringe movements. Moreover, there is a chink in Hofstadter's essay that lets in a ray of doubt:

The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life. One may object that there are conspiratorial acts in history, and there is nothing paranoid in taking note of them. This is true. 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 but little exaggeration, as conspiratorial.

Since the assassinations of President Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Knight asserts, the term "conspiracy" has undergone a shift from right to left, from the realm of crackpot theories to a current in mainstream American culture. After Watergate, Iran-Contra, the legal settlements with tobacco companies, and, as recent news coverage suggests, the handling of ballots in Florida, the word "conspiracy" is less a delusional fantasy than an all-too-plausible, realistic explanation of specific covert actions and cover-ups.

Unfortunately, Knight loses some momentum in the two chapters he devotes to analyzing how conspiratorial rhetoric has been deployed by feminists and African-Americans in their struggles against institutional oppression—precisely because he muddles the distinction between literal conspiracies and metaphorical ones. Insofar as these movements have led to progressive change, he appears to endorse this use of the term, even if it leads him into some bizarre formulations and deconstructive readings. His chapter on feminism would not endear him to Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, or Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash*, since both writers specifically reject the term "conspiracy" because they want to be taken seriously. Similarly, in his chapter "Fear of a Black Planet," Knight engages in a defense of "black paranoia," which he claims does not "necessarily end up diverting otherwise well-intentioned proto-political fervor from the real struggle for decent education, jobs, and healthcare." This may be, but believing that AIDS is a genocidal plot against blacks, or that vaccinations are contaminated by man-made viruses and therefore should be avoided, is destructive and harmful, not creative or progressive, unless these hypotheses can be proven to be true. At the end of these chapters, Knight sums up his position on the relation between conspiracy and social change: "In the case of feminism and black activism, conspiracy theory has become a rough and ready appropriation of the language and logic of the social sciences, a do-it-yourself sociology in an age that finds any discussion of social causation deeply suspicious." Instead of condoning a shallow appropriation of social science, why not leave these questions to social scientists and historians who *can* make judgements about what is fact and what is fiction?

Admittedly, pinning down the truth of the matter can be discouragingly difficult. It appears impossible to trace a coherent picture of the entire scheme if conspiracies are characterized by the endless deferral of meaning. Knight is at his best when he tackles examples of this dynamic in the intricacies of the JFK assassination, gives original interpretations of the novels of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, or offers postructuralist readings of the television series *The X-Files*. Nearly forty years after the fact, it is a little shocking that there is no consensus as to the "number, timing, or direction of the bullets" in the JFK assassination. *The X-Files* has exploited the "vertigo of interpretation," a term Knight borrows from the French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, into a puzzle that has been sustained over seven seasons (and apparently the show will be renewed for an eighth). Between the shady machinations of the Syndicate, a group that is either conspiring with alien colonizers or against them, the Cigarette Smoking Man (who is cast, incidentally, as the shooter in the 1960s assassinations), alien bounty hunters, and the upper echelons of the FBI, it is hard to tell who is duping whom. At one point, Knight likens the diffuse power structure of the *Files* to the theories of Michel Foucault; later on, he suggests that the series operates on the principle of "différance," echoing the French wizard of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. One thing is certain: French postructuralism and conspiracy theory fit together like the minotaur and its labyrinth. And there is something faintly conspiratorial or paranoid in the postructuralist habit of reading texts as repositories of hidden signs and elusive, unexpected meanings.

Speaking of the endless deferral of meaning, Knight never exactly tells us what this popular fascination with conspiracy is supposed to signify, except that he does cite Fredric Jameson's opinion on the subject. And I think that Jameson 's insight is useful for understanding conspiracies more generally as a condition of postmodernity: "Conspiracy is 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." In other words, we are no longer able to grasp our position within an increasingly bewildering global network in which money flows through ever more circuitous and opaque systems—the protests in Seattle, Quebec City, and Genoa are symptomatic of the anxiety that human rights are regularly trampled in the name of free trade. Moreover, global exchange defamiliarizes the most mundane objects that surround us: the cars we drive contain parts from half a dozen countries, and the foods we eat are made of "natural and artificial" flavors whose chemical composition is not fully known even to the manufacturers. Paradoxically, conspiracies provide an illusion of identity and location (*I am persecuted*) at the same time that they recede into infinite uncertainty (*by whom?*).