

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsou

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Discerning the Signs of the Times: The role of history in conspiracism

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Abstract

Discerning the Signs of the Times is a common attitude of humans, trying to “see through a glass, darkly” in order to explain ambiguous, fearful events that are really or allegedly triggered by evil forces. Thus, conspiracism, which traces the meaning of an uncertain world in a universal cunning plot, is widely acknowledged as one of the most fashionable Signs of our Times. This paper attempts to examine the possible role of history in working through conspiracism, focusing on the rivalry between conspiracism and anti-conspiracism, the distinction between the top-down and bottom-up conspiracy theories, their indirect feeding by historical paradigms and analogies, the strong challenge to the intrinsically detective character of any historical investigation posed by them, and the differentiation in rational language between “conspirators” and their opponents. These aspects may be included in a major project, examining the possibilities that conspiracism provides to history in illustrating the Signs of the Times.

Keywords

signs of the times , conspiracism , anti-conspiracism , history

In 1915 the famous Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote a strange poem entitled “*But The Wise Perceive Things About To Happen*” (“*Σοφοί δε Προσιόντων*”). Inspired by a mystical dictum of Philostratos and impressed by the tragic reality of the First World War, Cavafy started to investigate the ancient occult meaning of the wise men who are able to see through the obvious events. He distinguished between “*ordinary mortals*”, who “*know what’s happening now*”, “*the gods*”, who “*know what the future holds*”, and the “*wise men*”, who “*are aware of future things just about to happen*”. These men, “*during moments of intense study*”, listen “*the hidden sound of things approaching*”. Therefore, Cavafy traces and expresses a common human experience that spins all historical process, an experience whose very lack, two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ eagerly acknowledged as a spiritual blindness: “*When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather; for the sky is red’. And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening’. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times*” (Matthew 16:2b–3). In another instance too, Saint Paul, speaking of the impotence of human beings to discern the future, insisted that all we can do now is only “*to see through a glass, darkly*” (1 Cor. 13:12), justifying thus Arnaldo Momigliano’s claim that, in contrast to Jews, Christians stimulated to look for omens into historical facts due to their intense apocalyptic mentality (Momigliano, 1990, 27).

From the outset, I would like to argue that it is precisely this “*hidden sound of things approaching*” that encourages contemporary conspiracists to dispute the official and reassuring explanations of major historical events in their attempt to discern the signs of the times. They address a general, ambiguous anxiety for their present and future, and being either wise or lunatics, they talk in apocalyptic tones, readily setting themselves the task of being the medium between “*gods*” and “*ordinary*” or sheeplike mortals, forecasting always a gloomy future planned by wicked, corrupt and depraved groups usually connected to the state.

Conspiracism, an overloaded term with a firm negative undertone, especially among academics, journalists, or the establishment circles, was first coined by Daniel Pipes and popularized by Frank P. Mintz. It should be discerned from conspiracy and conspiracy theory, being a term broader in scope than the latter, rather a mode of thinking and a worldview that places conspiracy theories at the core of the very historical process, and explaining all historical events as driven by malevolent groups or individuals plotting against religion, democracy, culture, tradition, or, generally, the common good. As Bratich (2009) explains, “*it gathers conspiracy theories together under the unity of an “ism” to describe a body of thought that regards conspiracies as a driving force in history*” (p. 4).

Conspiracies have actually a long historical pedigree traced back to ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Yet the construction of conspiracy theories seems to proliferate in the Middle Ages, flourish after the French Revolution, take a vast dissemination during the 20th century, reaching its peak to a really snowballing conspiracism in the last five decades. Nowadays such theories have virtually exploded into the general public and spread rapidly through the

media, mainly into the cyberspace communities, as well as television programmes, talk radio and films, while an ever-growing body of literature is obviously at work. Many speak actually of a mass psychosis that permeates individuals and groups obsessively devoted to insidious intrigues behind historical occurrences by individuals or groups in power. Therefore, throughout the East and the West, and certainly in the United States, which is the real milieu that harbours the majority of such theories, conspiracism gains an ever-increasing reception or, at least, tolerance. Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay "*The Paranoid Style in American Politics*" (1964) was the first who psychologically pathologized the adoption and circulation of such theories, setting also the pace on subsequent works, where the antagonist Other is no longer an external enemy, a foreign invader, but conversely is "one of us" who resembles and actually simulates the normal citizens. Thus, the historian Henry Steele Commager noticing that "*we are on the road to a paranoid explanation of things*" argued that "*there's some psychological requirement that forces [conspiracists] to reject the ordinary, and find refuge in the extraordinary*" (Posner, 1993, p. 470-471).

We now come to the principal question of this paper: *What are the links between history and conspiracism? Which is, or should be, the role of history in conspiracism?*

Let me discuss only some of these links. At first, we should note that we rather have to speak not of the role of history in conspiracism but particularly of the role of the historians. The reason is that history is no longer a supernatural Muse, but it is precisely *historiography* (Jenkins, 1991), that is, the work of a person incorporated in a professional club with a sheer social and ideological engagement, working in the middle of various and usually competing institutions, guilds, prejudices and compromises that inevitably imbue his work. According to Michel De Certeau (1988), historical operation is not only "*the effect merely of a personal philosophy or the revival of past 'reality'*", but rather "*a combination of 'social place, scientific practices, and writing'*" (p. 64). Consequently, in the issue of conspiracism the historian might be considered not as the neutral negotiator of a disinterested historical meaning, attempting to prove the truth of his past documents and his explanations, but as a cautious and vigilant scholar who merely elucidates aspects of the past, striving at the same time to find his public place and ensure his social status between conflicting versions of "truth", which usually have a deep Manichean determination. Historians are, or should be, disturbing gadflies, who are accustomed to pose upsetting questions, which are sometimes considered much more valuable than their responses, and they do not only ruthlessly analyze, but also create the given and, even more, the desirable historical data in order to construct a plausible narrative of the past. Therefore, historians always search for new, unusual and workable solutions to the problems they face, yet, it is also common to search precisely for problems to the mainstream solutions.

In the same vein, conspiracism may thus be considered as a strong challenge to the intrinsically detective character of any historical investigation. For history is principally a plot, a human intrigue. Historians are often considered as detectives (Collingwood, 1946,

p. 93), who investigate each historical phenomenon looking forever for the hidden aspect of things happened, since, in any case, “the devil is always in the details”. This is precisely what creates history’s magnificent intellectual charm. The real, potential, or imagined concealment of the past reality is in fact the motor and the fascination of the very historical profession. Always querying and disputing the truthfulness of events, historians construct a narrative based on the obvious as well as the secret aspects of them, while they show a really genuine obsession with secrecy. Indeed, all the respected undertaking of historical revisionism is founded on the disclosure of a not yet noticeable interconnectedness between the various elements of a historical plot, which is usually generated from new historical sources or new historical questions. Even more, historians’ role is to generously unmask the causes and outcomes of the not-yet-transparency of past events, and doing so they are committed to always seek behind-the-scenes explanations, which of course is a key characteristic of conspiracy theories.

Another link between history and conspiracism lays in the on-going and ever-increasing conflict between conspiracists and anti-conspiracists, which nowadays is fiercely taking place. Indeed, there is a great variety of conspiracy theories all over the world, either plausible, implausible, unreasonable, or even ridiculous and bizarre. These theories may be depicted in a Foucaultian way as “*subjugated knowledges*”, that is, naïve, disqualified and insufficiently elaborated knowledges, which are usually “*beneath the required levels of cognition and scientificity*” “ and “*have been buried and disguised in a functional coherence or formal systematization*” (Foucault, 1980, p. 81-2). Nevertheless, the dominant asymmetries of power leave greater space to the other side of the spectrum, where the so-called “*conspiracy panics*” govern (Bratich, 2008), namely, individuals or groups who, along with the “*moral panics*”, have methodically constructed a narrative of threat to the interests and morals of the social body. By defining the symbolic territory of the conspiracist regime, they try to ensure its supposedly social or political hygiene. Conspiracy panics, working as the social engineers of a rational, moderate public good, are usually academics, professional journalists or various government officials that attribute historical, psychological, or social menaces to conspiracist thought in order to support their own style of thought as a model of political rationality, social integrity, and scientific authority. Thus, they “*help to define the normal modes of dissent*” (Bratich, 2008, p. 11) and largely monitor the public threat, offering tools to identify conspiracy theories that include “*common sense, a knowledge of history, and the ability to recognize distinct patterns of conspiracism*” (Pipes, 1997, p. 38). Moreover, linking thought to action, “*they provide the underpinning for material practices such as legislation, social policy, and policing techniques*” (Bratich, 2008, p. 10). They also refuse to accept an excess of skepticism beyond their own liberalism’s flexibility, that is, further than the reasonable and normative to the liberal regime self-problematization (Bratich, 2008, p. 40 – 42). Consequently, they serve in fact as government advisors in the struggle of excluding those who adopt conspiracy theories or thinking from the social,

political and cultural periphery, practicing therefore a social surveillance against the real or alleged extremism and zealotry of conspiracism. This “*anti-conspiracy discourse*” (Go-shorn, 2000) can easily feed state intervention into the context of conspiracists and lead even to the criminalization of any dissent, because even conspiracy thought itself could be dangerous and show the way to violence or terrorism.

Given that the authenticity or, rather, plausibility of historical narratives is bound to an ideological, social, economic, political, cultural or religious setting, historians are to acknowledge that such an oscillation between the established, powerful center and the impotent fringes characterizes to a great extent their mission in our society. In such a society, which is “*endowed with powerful centralizing strategies*”, historians especially in the last decades “*work in the margins*”, and “*deviate’ by going back*” to “*zones of silence*”, as “*madness, festival, or popular literature...*”, as De Certeau claims (De Certeau, 1988, p. 79). Therefore, conspiracism seems to work in the margins and tries to contribute to the notion that history has proven time and again that no testimony of any authority is guaranteed to be true. It is given that governments, or other institutions, often lie, deceive, mask evidence, or usually tell half-truths, even for “beneficial” or “justified” reasons, such as those for national security. They unsurprisingly want to confirm their position in the power’s net, and as power is impossible to be separated from knowledge, which in turn serves the hidden or obvious interests of state, historians should scrutinize the power/knowledge relation engulfed in the famous Foucaultian “*regimes of truth*”. They should then acknowledge that power is omnipresent at every micro-level of the social body, and is, moreover, war-like, as Foucault himself insisted that “*the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning*” (Foucault, 1980, p. 114).

In their working through the conspiracist domain, historians should also examine the distinction between the *top-down* and *bottom-up* or *populist* conspiracy theories. In the mainstream version of things, conspiracy theories are usually considered only those which derive from fringe groups and are directed to the establishment. It is allegedly an attack of the powerless periphery to the authoritative centre. Thus, the fundamental feature of the former is their potent anti-authoritarian inclination, the critique of the standard version of how things happened, entailing furthermore to the construction of a counter-culture which is at odds with the present ruling culture. However, there are also top-down conspiracy theories, which are generated from the core of the establishment and focussed on particular groups or organizations in order to enhance much more their power or conceal their illegitimacies. They are part of the state’s discourse, as often occurs in all countries. Consequently, such theories can aid the state in diverting attention away from political flaws or failures and toward a constructed enemy in order to win wider popular support for state policies or behaviors that otherwise may be more effectively challenged (Pipes, 1996, pp. 358–361). Certainly, these top-down conspiracy theories seem to be propor-

tionally fewer than the populist ones, because part of state's conspiracy policy may be the systematic concealment of it.

Another aspect of the relationship between historians and conspiracism is the direct or indirect feeding of the latter by providing historical paradigms and analogies. For conspiricism, as a worldview, is indeed not without foundation, as it does not operate in a vacuum. In her recent study, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy*, the historian Kathryn S. Olmsted, attempting to solve the mystery of the popularity of 9/11 conspiracy theories and the profound distrust of U.S. government by more than a third of American people, insists that the real state conspiracies of the past are plainly the cause of it (Olmsted, 2011). Historical memory can easily point to examples of a real past political conspiracy upon which conspiracists can potentially build a conspiracy theory, constructing thus historical analogies that acknowledge the internal logic and diachronic dynamic of such conspiratorial doings. In any case, almost all theorists, including even the official ones, concede to the fact that small or bigger conspiracies have always occurred in the span of the centuries, and that there is always a "grain of truth" to conspiracy theories. They also recognize the existence and the constantly hidden, and often illegal or dishonest, activity of intelligence agencies in all nations and in all ages. These official groups are focused onto the maintenance and the safeguarding of a certain state from real or supposed internal and external enemies, while they often financially support para-military groups that undertake special tasks with illegal means. The consequences of their activities are certainly examined by historiography, providing therefore historical paradigms that may come even to the point to hold the idea of history as a mega-conspiracy. Since history is bound to always historicize, it must identify not only the randomness of historical experience, but also the intended targets, the human or structural agency towards a certain goal.

It is also worth-noticing that, sometimes, the distinction between conspiracists and anti-conspiracists is not so much a matter of thought or explanation but rather a matter of language, which is frequently misleading. The former often use an obviously or seemingly irrational language, connecting concepts and things that usually seem to be awkward or unreasonable to the common sense. This repugnance is moreover enforced by the overwhelming usage of commercialization in their discourse: even the personal style of conspiracists is usually one of an advertiser who sells not only scepticism, but mainly books or films of anxiety, fear and panic along with other commodities. This is often their most vulnerable spot. On the opposite, anti-conspiracists try to respond in a meticulously rational language, drawing attention to the irrational jumps of their rivals, providing evidence of the vacuums and discrepancies in their thought in order to demonstrate their unfaithfulness. They draw their arguments on a supposedly unrivaled wealth of expertise, confirming thus their scientific superiority against their antagonists. However, such an attempt usually entails to a dialogue of the deaf, because conspiracists acknowledge in the very language of the state only the concealment of the truth. In such an ambivalence

between rational and irrational language historians should, therefore, take into consideration that their past documents are invariably papers that do not coincide with the present rational style of scientific historiography. On the contrary, they always try to face them merely as an opportunity to scrutinize the veiled aspect of an often bizarre superficiality, being aware of the fact that nothing can be taken entirely at face value.

At last, the attempt to construct a specific historical theory of conspiracism is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to offer some brief thoughts for that purpose, reminding Michel De Certeau's saying that "*history is always ambivalent: the locus that it carves for the past is equally a fashion of making a place for a future*" (De Certeau, 1988, 85). Thus, I argue that conspiracism might be included in the territory of the Foucaultian genealogical plan of the "*histories of the present*", that is, an attempt to look painstakingly into a contemporary phenomenon utilizing the means and methods of historical profession in order to de-familiarize the present or the concept of the present itself. It is well-known that the French philosopher offered an elaborated genealogical project so as to erode the necessary, inevitable, normative and powerful of the established center by the contingent and contestable of its margins.

Therefore, if conspiracism is a symptom of a persistent nervousness about the present and, mainly, the future of the world, then historians, by examining not merely the truthfulness of conspiracy theories, but the ability to designate their self-consciousness, could question our assumptions about the present and offer an important diagnosis of what the history of the present may entail. Looking at the uneasiness of the "conspiracy panics" that is at stake, we might consider that conspiracism is not a foolishness, as it often seems to be, but something that threatens the establishment, though often in an awkward or illogical way. It should be noted too that "[conspiracy theories] *ideologically address real structural inequities, and constitute a response to a withering civil society and the concentration in the ownership of the means of production, which together leave the political subject without the ability to be recognized or to signify in the public realm*" (Fenster, 1999, p. 67).

In similar vein, we could also ask if the silliest versions of conspiracy theories are the products of precisely an establishment's conspiracy in order to confuse the conspiracist sphere and defend itself by debunking the opponents. The common sense way, saturated by the currently imposed rationality, may not be the proper mode of thinking about conspiracism. Kathryn S. Olmsted (2011), although admits that conspiracy theories "*inject toxins into the public discourse*", concludes at last that they "*help to keep American democracy healthy and inform the public debate*", seeking moreover for government transparency (pp. 235-236).

Furthermore, we should take into account that the contemporary burst of conspiracy theories has not accidentally occurred in the very era of postmodernity, where multi-narrativeness is substantively its cornerstone. History, after the "narrative turn", is now in plural form. History then seems to serve the postmodernist convention of bricolage,

where everything can be reasonably and legitimately connected to everything. It does not acknowledge a truth, but adheres to the very idea of the pluralism or polytheism of truths and values, where the rational and the irrational, the scientific and the para-scientific, the intended and the unintended, mingle their boundaries, following to a democratization of historical views. Thus, conspiracism is founded on this postmodern autonomy of expression, which has essentially no symbolic Father, no authority, no law, that is, no authentic, legitimate story to be said and be thought of. Conspiracism is a product of an era obsessively devoted to an ever-increasing multiplication of concepts and things, either we like it or not, being also a warning of “*the hidden sound of things approaching*”. Future is always approaching to us and there is no reason to suspect that this could be void of fear, uncertainty or contingency, despite comfortable state reassurances. On the contrary, it is precisely “*conspiracy thinking [that] gives hope, unity, and purpose in a world that often seems beyond the reach of the powerless*” (Goldberg, 2001, p. 260), and even though conspiracism seems to be exaggerated, ridiculous, lunatic, or commercialized, it needs a balanced, cautious and unobstructed cognizance of its curious character. Thus, historians should not take it at face value, or pay much attention on its real or supposed psychological consequences, but always scrutinize its irresistible dynamic, trying to be no longer the old-fashioned chroniclers of the king who simply reassure his power.

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