

Jan. 29-31, Feb. 6-8, 2008

**Understanding
Conspiracy Theory:
The "Paranoid Style" and the
"Culture of Fear"**

I. The Appeal of Conspiracy Theory

- ◆ Is conspiracy theory an American tradition?
 - ❖ Not uniquely American at all: Arab conspiracy theories about 9/11: the Israelis did it.
 - ❖ Concept of the “political function” (or ideological work) of conspiracy theory.
 - ❖ More unique: “Culture of fear” that has run through American history. *Bowling for Columbine* clip.

The Truth Is Out There.

- ◆ Conspiracy theory as “alternative explanations” or “real history,” alternative to respectable, officially-accepted knowledge.
 - Distrust leads people to seek out *un*respectable, unofficial sources.
 - People find conspiracy beliefs attractive & all-American because they seem to indicate one’s independence of authority.

I. The Appeal of Conspiracy Theory (cont.)

- ◆ Close association of c.t. with 1960s (and its aftermath)
 - Radicalism, counterculture, drugs and paranoia.
 - Broader cultural trend: empowering individuals, “Power to the people,” “Question Authority,” “Do Your Own Thing.”
 - Parents, clergy, politicians, teachers lost much of their cultural authority & prestige.
 - Flowering of “New Age” religions, new popularity of old folk beliefs, “stigmatized knowledge,” legendary history: Donovan’s “Atlantis.” ★ 🔔
 - Scientific delirium madness (5D): “democratic” attacks on science. ★ 🔔
 - Legitimation of “alternative” medicine and science: unproven herbal remedies (echinacea) & dietary supplements.
 - Hippie/left ideas spread to right: “Intelligent Design”/Creation Science.
- ◆ Post-Enlightenment, postmodern ideas of knowledge: Eric Hobsbawm on “anti-universalism” (subjective truths valid whatever the evidence)
- ◆ Alternative science as c.t., c.t. as intellectual democracy
 - Natural Cures “They” Don’t Want You To Know About
 - Anti-scientific nature of c.t.: non-testable, non-falsifiable
 - Thimerosal, Autism, and the anti-immunization movement: NVIC, new TV lawyer show
 - Long history of popular opposition to medicine based on the misguided common sense of ordinary people: Ben Franklin and the Boston inoculation controversy of 1720-21
- ◆ C.t. cooler than reality, making history and politics into thrillers.

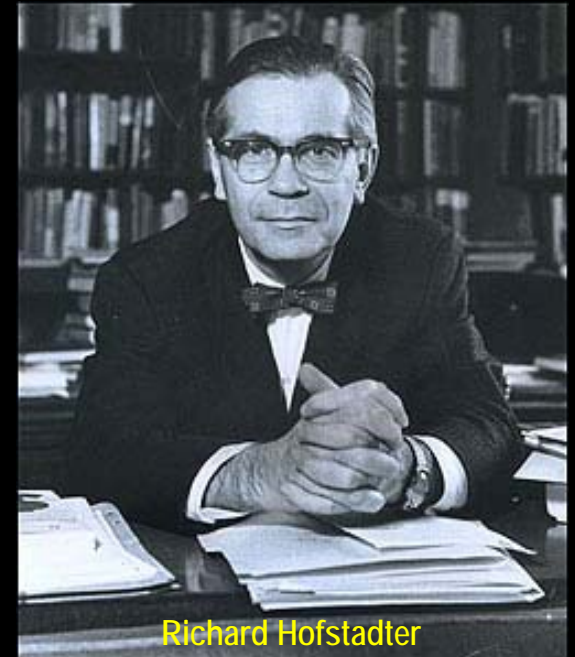
II. What is a Conspiracy Theory?

◆ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*: History is driven by evil, secret, all-powerful, ultra-competent organizations bent on dominating the world & destroying life-as-we-know-it.

- Why historians like Hofstadter dislike conspiracy theory
 - ❖ The conspiratorial vs. the “accidental” view of history.
 - ❖ C.t. lends itself to extreme & dangerous forms of politics: Normal politics not enough to fight the conspiracy, justifying counter-conspiracies, violence, dictatorship.

◆ The Usual Conspiracy Theory Suspects

- Witches/Satanists
- Jews (pogroms, “blood libel,” “international bankers”)
- Freemasons
- Catholic Church (esp. Pope, Jesuits, convents)
- Communists
 - ❖ “30 Years of Treason” as anticommunist explanation for Cold War, world revolutions, social ills
 - ❖ Sen. [Joe McCarthy](#): “a conspiracy . . . so immense”
 - ❖ Exotic Commie plots
 - The “brainwashing” scare: CIA contractor Edward Hunter ([picture](#), [poster](#)) coins term, Virginia Pasley’s *21 Stayed*.
 - Projection & imitation: Fears led to CIA drug & brainwashing experiments (Artichoke, MK-ULTRA).
 - Alleged “[model town](#)” for training Communist agents.
 - [Fluoridation](#) and the threat to “our precious bodily fluids.”
- and, lately, terrorists & the Saddam/9-11 connection



II. What is a Conspiracy Theory? (cont.)

- ◆ Underlying attitude of recent c.t.: most or all unfortunate events and bad developments are caused by the machinations of hidden knots of evildoers.
 - Corollary #1: Accidents, flukes or tragic mistakes do not just happen. There is no such thing as mere bad luck. Allows for the blaming of scapegoats and “closure” for the fearful or bereaved.
 - Corollary #2: Psychological and medical difficulties are caused by the personal malevolence of others or other factors. Trend of seeking medical causes for personal problems (“metaphoric illnesses”).
 - Corollary #3: Social problems never have “systemic” or social causes. Upholds the American ideology of “personal responsibility.”
- ◆ Problems with Hofstadter’s view of c.t. as “paranoia,” a form of mental illness based on 1950-60s developmental psychology
 - Popularity allows use of “conspiracy theory” as a partisan charge, to marginalize opponents and silence critics.
 - Other scholars have taken more sympathetic views of conspiracy theory:
 - ❖ Frederic Jameson: “mapping networks of power,” c.t. as a “poor person’s cognitive mapping”
 - ❖ Timothy Melley on “agency panic”
 - Scholars of conspiracy theory debate revolve around their rationality or irrationality, political/psychological efficacy or dysfunctionality.
 - Some “conspiracy theories” are true: K Street lobbyist efforts to make sure wealthiest Americans pay least taxes & gain most benefits, “vast conspiracy” to bring down Clinton, “conspiracy against labor” in early 20th c. & now
 - Real conspiracies tend not to be as exotic, hidden, or competent as conspiracy theories suggest. “They” seem to get what they want without movie thriller tactics.

III. A Cultural Approach to Conspiracy Theories

- ◆ Scares, panics, and extreme societal fears included in “conspiracy theory” category.
- ◆ Conspiracy theory as a literary genre (type of story).
 - CTs are narratives, must be read & interpreted like any other story or literary text.
 - Conspiracy theories as modern folklore, close to “urban legends”
 - CTs fall into stereotyped patterns, employing a number of common motifs, rhetorical strategies, and story elements, often merely rearranged according to the specifics of time, place, culture, and “villain” of choice.
- ◆ Examples of common motifs in American conspiracy theory
 - Children in jeopardy
 - Sexual corruption
 - Threats to free will or individuality
 - Suppressed miracles
 - Economic manipulation
 - Inversion
 - Sympathy for the Overdog
 - Mysterious Death Lists (killing off the witnesses)
- ◆ We will analyze CTs as stories, debunk many of them, but also examine real fears that inspire them and cultural-political needs CTs fulfill.
- ◆ Basic lesson in advance: CTs are dangerous because they tend to confuse people about their real problems and the most effective ways to deal with them.

