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.

- 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.