

JOHN BYRNE

An Impossibly Ordered Scheme: Conspiracy Theories and Interconnectedness

Order in chaos. It was science's oldest cliché. The idea of hidden unity and common underlying form in nature had an intrinsic appeal, and it had an unfortunate history of inspiring pseudoscientists and cranks.¹

In a recent edition of *The Skeptical Inquirer* (a publication which falls under the auspices of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) it was somewhat despairingly noted that even though “Human beings have never understood the material universe as thoroughly as they do today,” the “popular hunger for superstition, pseudoscience, and the paranormal” has never been greater.² Similarly, in *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, that well-known populariser of scientific concepts Carl Sagan remarked that “as the millennium edges nearer, pseudoscience and superstition will seem year by year more tempting, the siren song of unreason more sonorous and attractive.”³ Given the increasing popularity (at least in the Western world) of New-Age philosophies, astrology, “fringe” science, “pop” psychology and (most significantly for this essay) conspiracy theory, the above quotations seem to reflect a certain anxiety in the “rationalist” camp that we may be witnessing a resurgence of the “unreasonable,” the irrational and the superstitious.

Echoing such sentiments the cultural critic Mark Dery, in his collection of essays *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink*, draws our attention to Lawrence Weschler's notion that the current era represents not so much a complete manifestation of the postmodern, but rather "one of the cyclical recurrences of the premodern, a time whose hallmarks are deliriously heterogeneous tastes and a boundless appetite for the marvellous and the monstrous."⁴ Given the above, then, it would seem, if certain commentators are to be believed, that we are in the midst of an age almost "medieval" or "pre-enlightenment" in its concerns, an age in which Sagan's "Candle in the Dark" is in danger of becoming extinguished or at least conspicuously ignored.

On the one hand (following Weschler's lead) one can view such concerns as part and parcel of another re-run of recurring periods of "premodern" gullibility and irrationality: not a new phenomenon but a re-emergent one. On the other, one could argue that the phenomenon is to be located very much in the postmodern here and now, suggesting that "deliriously heterogeneous tastes," and the "popular hunger for pseudoscience and superstition," almost perfectly encapsulate postmodern fragmentation and the decline of "consensus reality."

Something often seen as symptomatic of a new bout of "anti-rationalism," as outlined by Michael Albert among others, is the growth in popularity of conspiracy theory in all of its colourful, preposterous and provocative manifestations.⁵ As exemplified by some of those who condemn it, one aspect of conspiracy thinking is its "causal reductionism:" tending as it does to reduce the complexity of social / political / economic relations to the machinations of a particular group or groups. In other words it is not, as Richard Hofstadter pointed out in his seminal essay, "The Paranoid Style In American Politics," that the exponents of conspiracy theory see "conspiracies or plots here and there in history" (something with which even the most ardent debunkers of

conspiracy could no doubt agree), but rather that they imagine one “‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events.”⁶ Another feature of conspiracy theories’ supposed irrationality is their tendency to, in Doug Moench’s words, “infer the existence of relationships between facts which may in fact have no relationship and draw conclusions based solely on such inferences without any other proof.”⁷

Yet, curiously, conspiracy theory can, in this regard, be thought of as a manifestation of a kind of “hyper-rationalism,” a rationalism above and beyond the normal limits of rationalist thought. As Mark Dery argues, conspiracy theory is part of that “all *too* rational rage for order...the belief that nothing is meaningless, that all of history’s seemingly loose ends are interwoven in a cosmic cat’s cradle of dark import.”⁸ By dotting the *i*’s and crossing the *t*’s of the contemporary world the conspiratorial mind-set seems to suggest that interconnectedness rather than fragmentation is the hallmark of the *zeitgeist*. The “hyper-rationalism” of conspiracy-theory research stems from a desire to know, to understand, to explain, to make sense of the complexities of contemporary life. Researchers often insist on the importance of files, dossiers, reports and facts and remain deeply committed to the idea of concrete, objective, verifiable truth. The “truth” that is sought is predominantly a totalising one, a truth which might offer a “paranoid” analogue to that elusive scientific Holy Grail, “the theory of everything.”

In examining both the fears and reassurances offered by the curious logic of conspiracy theory’s insistence on widespread interconnectedness, this article will first examine how various theories function as contemporary sense-making strategies or panaceas for the fragmentation of the postmodern world. It will then move on to discuss some of the reactions to increased global interconnectedness and the fears they reflect,

before finishing with some general comments on the current popularity of conspiracy theories and the idea of interconnectedness itself.

Through their emphasis on interconnectedness, conspiracy theories seem to be inherently suited to the “information overload” of the postmodern world. Those who have access to the various forms of media that dominate the dissemination of information, are bombarded daily by countless examples of soundbites, “factoids,” news flashes, rumours etc., which, according to many commentators, tend to overwhelm and stupefy the subject receiving them. As far back as 1970, for example, Alvin Toffler was writing about the cognitive responses to sensory overstimulation at a time when levels of media bombardment were noticeably lower than they are today. Toffler argued that “when we experience sensory overstimulation, we suffer confusion, a blurring of the line between illusion and reality.”⁹ The significant thing about much of this information is that it comes to one in fragments, snippets, “blink and you’ve missed it” images leaving the subject to wonder if any sense be made from such scraps, any totality pieced together, any narrative constructed. For this, it would seem, is where one can spot the reassurances of conspiracy theories. They seem to have the ability to create ordered, “rational” narratives out of information-based chaos and flux, signal out of noise, sense out of non-sense. As Mark Dery puts it:

conspiracy beliefs are...a source of cold comfort. At the end of a century that gave us the Theory of Relativity, the Uncertainty Principle, and the Incompleteness Theorem, conspiracy theory returns us to a clockwork universe, before the materialist bedrock of our worldview turned to quicksand. Conspiracy theory is a magic spell against the Information Age, an incantation that wards off information madness by organizing every scrap of the free-floating data assaulting us into an impossibly ordered scheme.¹⁰

In organising, rationalising and making sense of the random scraps of information which seem to float unanchored in the datasphere, conspiracy theory seems

to echo developments in postmodern critical theory. The analogy between conspiracy and semiotics, for example, has been noted by Dery who argues that since semiotics is something which “sees everything from Ted Koppel’s hair to superheroes as part of a cultural code to be cracked” it is, in this instance, “no stranger to the paranoid style.”¹¹

Those who promote conspiracy theories, therefore, are involved in a complex game (although they themselves often take it deadly seriously) of interpretation, with signs, clues and hidden meanings all pointing towards the presence of conspiracy. In other words the “game” (of the contemporary conspiracy fan) is essentially a vast, dizzying version of “join the dots.” The fact that the “dots” are so numerous and appear to form such an abstract pattern is *not* necessarily taken as a sign that they are isolated symbols of fragmentation, but rather suggests that a totality (a big picture) exists and it is mind-bogglingly complex. For conspiracy theories seem bent on resolutely refusing to acknowledge “noise” preferring instead to confront the tide of information in much the same way as one might view a “magic eye” picture. If one stares at the apparent disorder for long enough a clearly defined image will appear before one’s eyes.

From the perspective of conspiracy advocates the “threat” to the powers that be (the architects of conspiracies) comes not, as Grant Kester has suggested, from “a single piece of damaging information that ‘leaks out’ and exposes government malfeasance,” but rather from “the possible interconnections that might be made among dozens of different bits of information; bits that might mean little or nothing by themselves, but that, when assembled by the researcher into a particular narrative form, could prove extremely damaging.”¹² In other words it is precisely through “joining the dots” and revealing the connections between facts, events and phenomena that conspiracies can be exposed and opposed. This indeed is the position from which conspiracy narratives like the *X Files*, for example, operate. The myriad phenomena investigated by Fox Mulder

and Dana Scully each week are part of an implied totality, a totality generated by Mulder's inspirational / paranoid "hyper-rationality." Mulder (who is something of a "poster boy" for this mode of the "paranoid style") like many conspiracy theorists, can see the connections; the wood from the trees; finding links from aliens to demons to the Illuminati and back again; making him either a genius or a madman (or perhaps a bit of both). It is these very "uncovered" connections which will lead him to discover the Conspiratorial Grand Narrative (*the* conspiracy which all others leak back into and stem from) and which will also, ultimately, allow him to combat and challenge it.

Of course, where conspiracy theories and postmodern theory part company is in the former's insistence on objective quantifiable truth. In conspiracy theory one finds the articulation of the idea that just because we are not being "told the truth," it does not follow that there is no "truth" to tell. As the *X Files* slogan neatly puts it "the truth *is* out there." As Kester suggested, the job of the researcher is to "uncover" that truth by sifting through the mountains of information and "creating" meaning and sense. Without the dedicated researcher the connections between superficially unrelated "facts" would go unnoticed by overwhelmed, "future-shocked," media consumers. Fighting back against an atmosphere in which, as Mark Dery suggested, "the materialist bedrock of our worldview [has] turned to quicksand," conspiracy theories remain unyieldingly committed to the idea that events have a significance; they *signify* something; they are meaningful.¹³ In this they differ from Homer Simpson's assertion that a series of events can best be described as (and I paraphrase) "Just a bunch of stuff that happened."

In attempting to make sense of "information madness," conspiracy theories suggest not many systems but few (or, indeed, one), and not postmodern fragmentation but large scale interconnectedness and unity. Though functioning as a sense-making strategy conspiracy theory is indeed, as Mark Dery suggests, a source of cold comfort.

The connections it “uncovers” and proposes are essentially ones that inspire fear and suspicion, since they often indicate the presence of massive, labyrinthine power structures which threaten cherished personal liberties.

Connected networks, global multinationals, the “threat” of one-world governments: all of these indicate to the conspiracy theorist the prevalence of large-scale systems. The bigger and more complex it is, the more likely the system is to be dedicated to the elimination of civic rights and the oppression of a population. Conspiracy theory, in its most all-embracing manifestations, suggests that there exists a giant, insidious network of powerful groups and cabals contriving to keep the majority of mankind in a condition of slavish servitude. Whether the chief architects of this global conspiracy are the Bilderbergers, the Gnomes of Zurich, the Illuminati, the Priory of Sion, the Trilateral Commission, the United Nations or a combination of all of the above, conspiracy theories seem to suggest, as Dery has noted, that even in an apparently chaotic, impossibly complex and fragmented world, “*someone, somewhere* is in charge.”¹⁴

The point of these mooted global conspiracies is that they are, as Dery argues, impossibly ordered. “Common sense” tells us that no system could ever be so totalising and perfect, a realisation that has led some to propose that the architects of the conspiracy are aided by diabolic intervention. As Richard Hofstadter has observed, there exists within the paranoid mind-set the tendency to imagine the enemy as a demonic superbeing, free from error, doubt or hesitancy. The impossible order is maintained only through the agents’ own superhuman maliciousness. As Hofstadter put it the “enemy is clearly delineated: he is the perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman.”¹⁵

One of the bodies which is often posited as a vehicle for these “amoral supermen” is the United Nations. As an international organisation with “one-world”

ideals the UN is precisely the kind of body which suggests a threat to regional / community identity and self-management. From a certain conspiracy-minded perspective the blue-helmeted troops of the UN are perfect symbols of the organisation's globalist intentions. When the "D-Day" anticipated by various militia groups arrives it will be just these troops who will oversee the enslavement of the American citizenry. In fact there are those who suggest that UN forces are already secretly present in the United States, biding their time and waiting for the signal which will herald the New World Order take-over.

From the "Get US out of the United Nations" proclamations of the John Birch society to the doom-laden prophecies of commentators like William Norman Grigg (who claims that the "world government being pursued by the UN... would be a globe-spanning socialist regime of virtually unlimited powers"),¹⁶ the message seems to be that increased global interconnectedness will lead inevitably to assimilation. In other words, what globalism really amounts to is a loss of a discrete identity, a loss of definition and a loss of sovereignty followed by a gradual blurring into a great subjugated mass.

Suggested also here (especially with regard to the "regionalism" of the militias etc.) is a fear of all things cosmopolitan: cosmopolitanism being suggestive of a "global identity." It seems clear that from the sophisticated "Syndicate" members of the *X Files* to the urbane European super-villains of countless Hollywood action movies, it is the well-dressed, well-manicured, well-educated individual who is liable to be involved in sinister New World Order plots and schemes.¹⁷ Such an individual's cosmopolitan nature is, in comparison to the home-spun provincial "decency" of the militias' "good old boys," indicative of a certain decadence. Using a system of links which conspiracy researchers themselves might employ, one could suggest that to such anti-globalists as the militias, "decadent" suggests "cultured," "cultured" suggests "European,"

“European” suggests “Jewish,” and “Jewish” suggests “Anti-Christian ‘One-World’ ambitions.”

The New World Order nightmares dreamed up by conspiracy theorists are, of course, not the only vehicles of the theory that “Everything is connected.” The potency of the idea of interconnectedness and order behind apparent chaos seems to have reached something of an apex in recent years, with variations of the idea articulated in fields as diverse as chaos mathematics and New Age philosophy. In each of these cases (and despite their differing methodologies and emphases) the notion that there exist random, isolated events which have little or no bearing on each other, or the “system” as a whole, is one that tends to be frowned upon. The New Age perception of “Gaian Overminds” and planetary consciousness as part of a transcendental evolutionary leap, however, seems to find its paranoid flip-side in the world of conspiracy theory. The “cosmic holism” of much New Age philosophy does in fact offer, what Dery calls, “its own Smiley-face take on conspiracy theory” through the “gaggingly cute...concept of ‘pronoia’ – the sneaking suspicion that everyone is conspiring to help you.”¹⁸ Less extreme, but still focusing on the benevolence of planetary interconnectedness, one website puts it as follows:

The peace, the fix, comes from remembering in our hearts that we are tiny natural parts of an immense natural whole. Although the patterns of existence and our part in it are far beyond our intellectual understanding, we can relax and trust the process because we are an inseparable part of it.¹⁹

For those who fear the coming “one-world” government such rhetoric would no doubt sound like that of a totalitarian apologist. William Norman Grigg has, in fact, highlighted the difference between New Ageism’s advocacy of increased interconnectedness (and awareness of existing planetary dependencies) and the views of some of the “Christian right” who oppose the UN. Grigg claims that “values, practices

and institutions rooted in biblical teachings would be eradicated and supplanted with the eco-pagan principles contained in the UN's *Earth Charter*.²⁰ Grigg also criticises the *Earth Charter*'s celebration of humankind as "one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny" and its recognition of human beings as essentially part of nature, with all the duties and responsibilities that status entails.²¹ Grigg's comments seem to reflect an anxiety within the "Christian right" that, as I suggested earlier, increased globalisation and interconnectedness involve a fundamental loss: a loss of clearly defined regional / national identity, a loss of individual liberties, a loss of traditional boundaries and a loss of humanity's "special status" with regard to "mankind's" dominion over the animal kingdom. What will replace existing structures, Grigg suggests, is a "democratic biosphere administered by the UN's priesthood of Gaia."²²

Echoing the New Age celebration of "planetary consciousness" etc, the narratives of alleged alien abductees, as outlined by researchers such as John Mack, invoke again, what Nigel Clark has called, "the benevolent spectre of universal interconnectivity."²³ Mack believes that the abduction experience enables those who undergo it to "shed their identification with a narrow social role and gain a sense of oneness with all creation, a kind of universal connectedness."²⁴ More significantly perhaps, Jodi Dean claims that the experience leads abductees to view "connectedness" as one of the defining features of their lives. Every superficially random and unconnected event becomes part of a new and perplexing narrative with abductees connecting

missing computer files with missing fetuses...gazes from strangers sitting across a room with phones that ring and then stop...the emotions they feel when seeing a picture of a big-headed Gray with enormous black eyes with their inability to remember details from their pasts.²⁵

As Dean suggests, the belief that all of these events are somehow connected implies that there must be “one explanation...to account for all of them.”²⁶ This quest to discover one meaning, a meaning that would bind all of the loose strands together is, as I have suggested, possibly *the* defining characteristic of contemporary conspiracy theories. Whether that “discovered” meaning is terrifying (as in the case of New World Order nightmares), spiritually enlightening (New Age philosophy and certain abduction narratives) or a source of Dery’s “cold comfort” (the “realisation” that at least the world is ordered and not chaotic), conspiracy theory functions as a “unified field [theory] for a hopelessly complex, chaotic world.”²⁷ With the collapse of traditional religious structures and sense-making strategies, conspiracy theory seems to step into the breach helping to, as John A. McClure put it, “[replace] religion as a means of mapping the world without disenchanting it [or] robbing it of its mystery.”²⁸ In other words, conspiracy theory seems to be both a symptom of postmodern fragmentation and a cure for it. It reflects the contemporary distrust of authorities and powerful bodies but also helps to reintegrate a sense of a lost narrative, a story that could explain how things function: giving one the ability to “map” the contemporary world. It is this notion of conspiracy theory perhaps, which led Fredric Jameson to describe it as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age.”²⁹ The kind of “maps” drawn by conspiracy theorists have as much in common, one is tempted to say, with Jameson’s “sophisticated” cognitive mapping as the “here be Dragons”-style charts of the past do with the pinpoint accuracy of global positioning systems.

Perhaps, though, the popularity of conspiracy theories owes as much to the current cultural dominance of the “network meme” as it does to the collapse of the “grand narrative.” In a world dominated by Microsoft’s *Windows* and the World Wide Web it seems we are growing accustomed to the ubiquity of the network, the

interconnectedness of all things. The Web has of course been both a breeding ground for, and a means of disseminating, conspiracy theories and, as has been noted by certain critics, the architecture of the net itself seems inherently suited to the logic of conspiracy: for the net is nothing if not an elaborate system of links and connections. In this sense the net could have a dual function or effect. By providing links to other areas of interest the net implicitly suggests genuine connections between apparently discrete subject areas. By linking from a site concerned with alien colonisation to one dealing with the Chupacabra and other cryptozoological oddities it is possible to imagine that these phenomena are part of some baffling (yet to be understood) totality; some totalising logic.

By offering a world of order, a world of sense, a world of meaning, conspiracy theories seem to fit neatly into the current cultural climate; a climate of too much noise and not enough signal. Whether or not the giant “jigsaw puzzle” being painfully constructed by conspiracy researchers has, ultimately, any “truth value” (in the conventional rationalist sense) is something of an irrelevance, for it does nothing to reduce the potency of its meaning for those who subscribe to it. As a belief system for a new millennium conspiracy theory restores a “faith” in a world where things are firmly nailed down and anchored, where events are connected, where the creeping threat of chaos and confusion is kept at bay. Its logic sits easily with our paranoia, our obsession with networks, and our indoctrination into the intellectual world of cross-referencing, intertextuality and endless internet surfing. We are, in essence, becoming like Casubon in *Foucault’s Pendulum*, prepared as he was “to see symbols in every object,” with our minds growing ever more accustomed to “connecting, connecting, connecting everything with everything else.”³⁰

Notes

- ¹ James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (London: Abacus, 1993) 157.
- ² “Fund for the Future” advertisement, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, July-August 1997, 10.
- ³ Mark Dery, *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink* (New York: Grove, 1999), 11.
- ⁴ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 148. One can think here, for example, of the manner in which the Internet has become a kind of postmodern freak show, containing as it does millions of images of the freakish, the abject and the grotesque.
- ⁵ Michael Albert, “Conspiracy?...Not Again” in *Z Magazine* – May 1992.
http://www.igc.org/pr/conspire/Conspiracy_Not_Again.htm.
- ⁶ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid style in American Politics” in David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 29.
- ⁷ Doug Moench, *The Big Book of Conspiracies* (New York: Paradox Press, 1995), 9.
- ⁸ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 11-12.
- ⁹ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock: A Study of Mass Bewilderment in the Face of Accelerating Change* (London: Bodley Head, 1970), 311.
- ¹⁰ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 12.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 20.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 9.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 12.
- ¹⁴ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 12. For an interesting articulation of the roles various agencies have allegedly had in constructing such giant conspiracies see George Piccard, *Liquid Conspiracy: JFK, LSD, the CIA, Area 51 and UFOs* (Kempton, Illinois: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999).
- ¹⁵ Hofstadter, “Paranoid Style”, 31
- ¹⁶ William Norman Grigg “Building World Order”. http://www.thenewamerican.com/tna/2000/07-03-2000/vol16no14_worldorder.htm. (2000).
- ¹⁷ See for instance the *Die Hard* series.
- ¹⁸ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 13.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.ahealingplace.org/earthsteward/connected.html>
- ²⁰ Grigg, “Building World Order”.
- ²¹ *Ibid*.
- ²² *Ibid*.
- ²³ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 148.
- ²⁴ John E. Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (London: Pocket Books, 1994), 409.
- ²⁵ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 146.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*.
- ²⁷ Dery, *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, 12.
- ²⁸ *ibid*.
- ²⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 356.
- ³⁰ Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 381, 467.