

Conspiracy theory in America

Lance deHaven-Smith

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In a 2006 essay, 'When Political Crimes Are Inside Jobs: Detecting State Crimes Against Democracy', Professor deHaven-Smith gave us the term SCAD, state crime against democracy. When I read his essay I didn't think the term had much chance of becoming widely used – Peter Dale Scott's deep politics and parapolitics had failed to make much headway – but I may be wrong. The term is getting quite a deal of traction as a Google search will show. There was a conference in London a couple of years about SCADs. Or so I remembered. But when I checked it was actually billed as SCCADs, State and Corporate Crimes Against Democracy, which indicates one of the problems with the SCAD concept, which I discuss below.

In this book deHaven-Smith does two main things. He traces the current use of the expression 'conspiracy theorist' back to the notorious 1967 memo issued by the CIA to all its agents and assets, with advice on how to respond to critics of the Warren Commission's verdict on the assassination of JFK: namely that those criticising Warren's conclusion should be described as 'conspiracy theorists'. The author notes that this turned out to be 'one of the most successful propaganda initiatives of all time'; the 'conspiracy-theory label has become a powerful smear that, in the name of reason, civility, and democracy, pre-empts public discourse, reinforces rather than dissolves disagreements, and undermines popular vigilance against abuses of power.'

Second, he tries to show that the authors of the American constitution and its subsequent amendments were well aware of the possibility of political conspiracy and created a system of checks and balance in their political system in the hope of preventing it. Thus, he claims, 'conspiracy beliefs about public officials constitute a separate and distinct category of political thought that has been part of American public discourse throughout its history'; and so 'the post-WWII

literature disparaging the popularity of “conspiracy theories” and linking them to nineteenth-century ethnocentrism and bigotry is an inaccurate and misleading account of American history’. Well, it’s a nice move but it won’t quite stand up to scrutiny. The founders of America did not have in their minds something like the John Birch Society and other nativist groups in the 1950s, let alone Alex Jones and David Icke; and Birch *et al* are not primarily concerned with ‘conspiracy beliefs about public officials’.

The problem here is that deHaven-Smith is basically only interested in what have elsewhere been described as ‘event theories’, of which JFK’s assassination and 9/11 are the outstanding examples. The other kinds of conspiracy theories, what we might loosely call the mega or meta theories, those blaming our ills on some secret organisation or other, are simply ignored. DeHaven claims that conspiracy theories are essentially ‘faction theories’. This may be true of event theories but not of the mega or meta theories which contaminate event theorists with their nonsense. DeHaven’s move to rename event theories as SCADs doesn’t solve this problem; and as the addition of the extra C to SCADs in the title of the London conference in 2011 shows, even for the discussion of event theories, SCAD is too narrow.

Robin Ramsay