

The Conspiracy and Democracy Project

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With a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, the Conspiracy and Democracy Project began in January 2013 at Cambridge University, with some academics at the helm.¹

The title of the project, Conspiracy and Democracy, might suggest that it is going to deal with the issue of how conspiracy as a practice undermines or impacts upon democracy. It might, for example, examine all the state conspiracies which now exist within this society; and since the armed forces, police, security and intelligence services (and the big corporations) are almost entirely unaccountable, such research would be entirely apt. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the British state – almost any modern state – is a set of interlinked conspiracies, competing for money (taxes) and power. One of the project's three directors, *Guardian-Observer* journalist, now Professor John Naughton, sort of gets this. He is quoted as saying: 'The reason we have conspiracy theories is that sometimes governments and organisations do conspire.'²

Indeed: *but how often is 'sometimes'?* Unless you have read parapolitics – and I think it a fair assumption that the project's academic members will have read little or none – your perception of the extent of conspiracies by governments and organisations will be a gross underestimate. There is a piece on Watergate on the site,³ for example, which makes the banal point that conspiracy and cock-up often go together but discusses only the more obvious conspiracies within the Nixon White House. The authors appear to know little about Watergate's place in and links to the American national security state revelations in the 1960s and 70s. However this

1 <<http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/>>

2 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24650841>

3 'Conspiracies, Cover-ups and Cock-ups: Watergate Edition' at <<http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/blog/category/complexity/>>.

is academic: examining conspiracies in the UK is not the direction the project is going to take.

Formally, this is what the project looks like:

A History research track asks whether the expanding public sphere and the rise of mass democracy since the 18th century has encouraged a shift from government suspicion of popular conspiracies to popular suspicion of government conspiracies, and, if so, why.

A Political Theory research track looks at the contribution philosophers have made to the analysis of conspiracy theories and their relationship to democracy.

The Internet Theory research track asks whether the internet is, in fact, uncontrollable and is exponentially expanding/removing all checks on the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

Fourthly, we ask what can we learn from a detailed ethnography of specific conspiracy theories operating in the contemporary period. The Social Anthropology research track aims to broaden the geographical scope of C&D as well as add to its repertoire of methodological approaches.⁴

It really should be called the Conspiracy Theories and Democracy Project, because it is conspiracy theories and their apparent impact on democracy which they are concerned about. The BBC report on the launch of the project was titled 'Are conspiracy theories destroying democracy?';⁵ and one of the project's three directors, Sir Richard Evans, began a piece about it with this:

'There is a crisis of trust in modern societies. Public confidence in the central institutions of representative democracy has been declining since the 1980s. Conspiracy theories play a key part in this process.'⁶

For the moment let us accept that Evans is correct and

4 From 'A Year in the Life of Conspiracy & Democracy' at <http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/blog/>.

5 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24650841>

6 http://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/news/news_item.cfm/newsid/17/newsid/206.

the decline in trust began in the 1980s. If so, where is the evidence that 'Conspiracy theories play a key part in this process'? In the 1980s there was little interest in conspiracy theories in the English-speaking world, with only a couple of tiny American magazines devoted to them. The explosion of interest in conspiracy theories in the English-speaking world was triggered – perhaps created – by the TV series *The X Files* in the mid 1990s. I spoke at the *Fortean Times* annual conference in 1996 on conspiracy theories and was told to expect an audience of about forty. In the event, much to the surprise of the FT and me, it was several hundred – *The X Files* effect. But Evans is wrong: in this country social surveys show trust in politicians declining from the early 1970s;⁷ and in the United States the decline began in the mid 1960s, caused by – yes, of course – the state's cover-up of the Kennedy assassination.⁸

John Naughton's comment that 'sometimes governments and organisations do conspire' is the place to start. If 'sometimes' is in fact frequently, perhaps routinely – and in my view it is – then 'conspiracy theorising' is not *per se* the irrational activity the project assumes it to be. Many conspiracy theorists are incompetent and many of the theories proposed are false but Sturgeon's law applies here: if 90% of conspiracy theories are crap, so is 90% of everything.⁹ It is easy to sneer at stupid conspiracy theories and mock the thinking processes of those who advocate them. But in doing so academics and journalists are contaminating the good theories with the bad, lumping together secret state research

7 See <<http://www.counterfire.org/theory/37-theory/14906-the-crisis-of-the-british-regime-democracy-protest-and-the-unions>>

8 See <<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/04/80-percent-of-americans-dont-trust-the-government-heres-why/39148/>>.

John Naughton, one of the three directors of the project, tweeted: 'The minute you get into the JFK stuff and the minute you sniff at the 9/11 stuff you begin to lose the will to live'. See <<http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/blog/category/jfk/>>. Yes, both subjects are full of crappy thinking and writing; and, yes, both subjects are now enormous and enormously complex. But tough shit: you cannot just pass on events of this size and expect to be taken seriously.

9 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturgeon's_law>

and David Icke's reptilian delusions as 'conspiracy theories'. Which is, of course, what the state wants us to do.

There are other issues: for example there is Anthony Summers' distinction between a conspiracy theory and a theory about a conspiracy. Take the discussion on the project's website about Watergate. Its opening lines are these:

'In David's talk at the recent Festival of Ideas he criticised the false dichotomy between a "conspiracy theory" of government and a "cock-up" theory of government. Conspiracies in democratic governments, he suggested, seem most often to be cover-ups of cock-ups.'

The authors – following David Runciman, the 'David' in the quote, one of the project's three directors – treat 'conspiracy theory of government' in the first sentence and 'conspiracies' in the second as if they are synonymous. But they are not. And there is, in fact, no 'conspiracy theory of government'. If you google that phrase you get lots of hits about governments, about conspiracies by governments and within governments, but none for 'conspiracy theory of government'.

Second, there is the issue of the status of a conspiracy theory. No matter how apparently absurd, a conspiracy theory is a proposition or propositions about the world. Propositions may be true, false, worth investigating, implausible, ridiculous etc. But some of the C and D project's members aren't treating conspiracy theories as theories; some of the time they treat them being as analogous to religious beliefs, with the content of the beliefs being irrelevant. But this is an error because religious beliefs are not, for the most part, propositions about the world, open to falsification. But conspiracy theories are. Again, 90% (at least) of conspiracy theories may well be bad/false theories but they are theories nonetheless.

Adam Curtis commented on this issue of loss of trust.

'Nobody trusts anyone in authority today. It is one of the main features of our age. Wherever you look there are

lying politicians, crooked bankers, corrupt police officers, cheating journalists and double-dealing media barons, sinister children's entertainers, rotten and greedy energy companies and out-of-control security services. And what makes the suspicion worse is that practically no-one ever gets prosecuted for the scandals. Certainly nobody at the top.' ¹⁰

Why point the finger at conspiracy theories when there are other, more obvious culprits for this loss of trust, starting with the behaviour of those who think we should trust them?

¹⁰ Adam Curtis in his essay 'Suspicious Minds' at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis>>.