

# Oh, conspiracy!

**Robin Ramsay**

The *Guardian* has been having an attack of conspiracy theory anxiety. First there was the piece on 18 December by Natalie Nougayrède, the former diplomatic correspondent and later editor of *Le Monde*, 'The conspiracy theories of extreme right and far left threaten democracy'.<sup>1</sup> The subhead, expressing her thesis, was this: 'In a complex, changing world both peddle a simple us-and-them narrative. The results are calamitous'. Here's a sample of her thinking.

'Part of the appeal of conspiracy theories is their simplicity. In a complex, changing world, it is tempting to reduce multifaceted issues to the us-and-them narrative. It is a vision that meets little contradiction because reasoned facts are sidelined by emotion. It is a binary scheme, with "the people" on one side and "the system" on the other.

"The people" are assaulted by plots prepared from inside "the system", which can be domestic (state institutions, traditional parties) or foreign (the EU, financial markets, the Bilderberg group.....the list is long).'

Nougayrède's piece was followed on 26 December by David Shariatmadari's 'A new theory of conspiracies'.<sup>2</sup> This opened with an account of

'Elliott, now 34, a "recovering" conspiracy theorist... ....[who] turned his back on a worldview that always posits some covert, powerful force acting against the interests of ordinary people.'

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1 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/18/conspiracy-theories-extreme-right-far-left-threaten-democracy>>

2 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/26/the-truth-is-rushing-out-there-why-conspiracies-spread-faster-than-ever>>

Shariatmadari discussed whether or not there are more conspiracy theories than there used to be (*maybe*); why they are so widespread (*the Internet speeds up their circulation – you think?*); and how we can combat them (*teach people to think better – good luck with that one!*).

Neither piece considers that *there might be* 'some powerful force[s] acting against the interests of ordinary people' and both offer the *canard* – always a glowing indicator of ignorance of the subject – that conspiracy theories simplify. Some do: nonsense such as 'the world's ill are all caused by the Jews/Illuminati/whatever', what have been called the mega theories, simplify. But much of what is dismissed as conspiracy theories – parapolitics or deep politics – does not. The work of William Blum, for example,<sup>3</sup> in detailing the role of the CIA in the USA's post-WW2 empire, *complicates* the study of American foreign policy (or would if academics and journalists could bring themselves to read it); and the work of the JFK researchers has produced almost unmanageable complexity. But then Blum and the better end of the Kennedy buffs aren't offering conspiracy theories so much as *theories about conspiracies*.<sup>4</sup> Mega conspiracy theories cannot be falsified because believers present an infinite regress of evasion strategies: 'Yes, but...'. Theories about conspiracies – sometimes called event conspiracies – on the other hand are open to the same empirical investigation as any other proposition.

'Conspiracy theorist' as a term of denigration was introduced by the CIA for use against critics of the Warren Commission in 1967 and proved so successful at scaring-off the career-minded and the conventional that its use spread to encompass almost any line of inquiry which strays beyond conventional narratives.<sup>5</sup>

In the major media the charge of 'conspiracy theorising' is being raised these days because the rabble – us – are

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3 See <[www.williamblum.org](http://www.williamblum.org)>.

4 This key distinction was first made by Anthony Summers.

5 See for example <<http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-02-23/1967-he-cia-created-phrase-conspiracy-theorists-and-ways-attack-anyone-who-challenge>>.

beginning to think the wrong things and 'democracy' threatens to express that. The perception that is currently giving the American and European elites the vapours is precisely that there is 'some powerful force [or forces] acting against the interests of ordinary people'. One 'powerful force' can be easily shown to be corporate interests within the EU;<sup>6</sup> the EU Commission itself is another. Ditto the interests of the bankers. Other obvious candidates are the arms and Israeli lobbies driving American foreign policy and the corporate funding of American and, to a lesser extent, British politics. And so on. In other words the radical agenda of both left and right.

Motivated by the same notion that conspiracy theories are a threat to democracy, there is a Leverhulme-funded project at the University of Cambridge which is exploring this.<sup>7</sup> One of the project's directors, Professor David Runciman, sounds quite reasonable:

'In a world of real conspiracies, you have to sometimes be a conspiracy theorist. Certainly you don't want to not suspect big organisations of being corrupt. Banks, businesses, drug companies.....That's what's interesting about this project: what's the conspiracy theory that's OK, and what's the kind that's not OK? It turns out it's really hard to draw the line.'<sup>8</sup>

Runciman doesn't say so, but the line he is drawing is between conspiracy theories (not OK) and theories about conspiracies (OK); which, in effect, means that parapolitics and deep politics are OK. However, on the evidence of its website, few of those in Runciman's project appear interested in following him. What does and does not count as a conspiracy theory is mostly unexamined and presumed to be self-evident; and anything so labelled is presumed to be false.

Runciman is better than that. Here he is again:

'Another tempting mistake is to assume that conspiracies

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6 <<http://corporateeurope.org/>>

7 <[www.conspriacy anddemocracy.org](http://www.conspriacy anddemocracy.org)>

8 Quoted at <<http://jfkfacts.org/assassination/news/cambridge-professor-explores-the-roots-conspiracy-theorizing/#more-11757>>

always point toward an intended outcome rather than simply covering up an existing state of affairs. The intention may simply be not to let people know what has happened i.e. to keep the secret a secret. When the FBI and CIA destroyed their files on Lee Harvey Oswald after the Kennedy assassination, it counted as evidence of a conspiracy but not evidence that there was a conspiracy to assassinate the president. The agencies may simply have not wanted people to know they didn't know what was going to happen even though Oswald was known to them: it was a cover-up of a cock-up not a cover-up of a conspiracy. But cover-ups of cock-ups produce real conspiracies because those involved have to keep their involvement secret for the scheme to work.'<sup>9</sup>

The point in the final sentence is true, if trivial; but perhaps worth making for the young academics and graduate students on his project. But did the CIA and FBI destroy their files on the Oswald, as he presumes? John Newman, for example, wrote a book about the CIA's files on Oswald and what the way they were handled and classified told us about Oswald's status within the Agency.<sup>10</sup> John Armstrong's *Harvey and Lee* discusses in great detail the FBI files on Oswald.<sup>11</sup>

Because Runciman hasn't read the JFK assassination literature, when he works in areas which would inform it he misses important details. For example he wrote a long, admiring review of the *The Passage of Power*, the fourth volume of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Unaware of the JFK literature, he didn't spot that Caro had entirely omitted the Billie Sol Estes story; and, given that the Estes story had been the front cover of *Time* magazine, the omission was deliberate. Why skip Estes? I suggested when the book was

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9 <<http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/blog/can-we-distinguish-conspiracies-from-other-forms-of-collective-action/>>

10 John Newman, *Oswald and the CIA* (Carroll and Graf:New York, 1995)

11 <<http://harveyandlee.net/index.html>> Starting points for FBI files on Oswald are at <[https://www.maryferrell.org/pages/JFK\\_Documents\\_-\\_FBI.html](https://www.maryferrell.org/pages/JFK_Documents_-_FBI.html)>.

12 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n13/david-runciman/what-if-hed-made-it-earlier>>

published<sup>13</sup> that Caro had to omit Estes because Estes leads to LBJ's role in the assassination of Kennedy.<sup>14</sup>

As an academic historian, Runciman isn't going to take that next step and look at these questions: in his world this would take him into JFK nutter country. But in acknowledging that some conspiracy theories are 'OK' he has opened the door to deep politics and parapolitics. We shall see if he and/or his conspiracy and democracy project do anything with this insight.

How successful was the CIA's campaign to attach 'conspiracy theorist' to the critics of the Warren Commission? Fifty years after the event, Robert Caro, one of America's leading historians of the period, is still afraid to approach the subject. This must be the most successful CIA psy-op.

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13 <<http://lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster64/lob64-view-from-the-bridge.pdf>>

14 Not least through Estes' memoir, which is on-line at <<https://app.box.com/s/8b408e6999f8799dfd0a/1/251450825/1960277221/1>>.

C/o of his publisher I wrote to Caro and asked him about the omission of Estes and did not get a reply. Roger Stone commented on this omission of Estes. See <<http://stonezone.com/article.php?id=580>>.