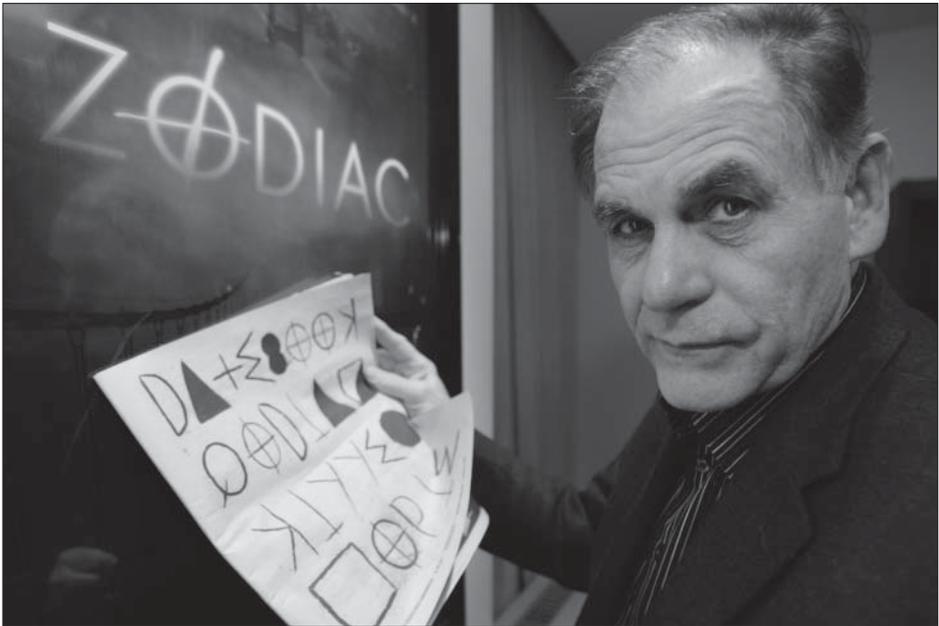


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"The Paranoid Style": An Introduction to Conspiracy Theories



(AP Photo)

Robert Graysmith, author of *Zodiac* and *Zodiac Unmasked*, views cryptographs used by the Zodiac killer.

After Hofstadter: Conspiracy Theories in America

By Paul McCaffrey

Most authorities agree that the modern study of conspiracy theories began in 1964, when the historian Richard Hofstadter published his seminal essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in the October issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Though Hofstadter’s thesis has endured its share of criticism over the years, with some contending that the ideas he enunciated have since been overapplied, it remains one of the essential texts in understanding conspiracy theories and their various components. Written in the long shadow of the John F. Kennedy assassination, “The Paranoid Style” is very much a product of its time and place, yet the issues and themes it illuminates continue to resonate in the present day. Moreover, through his survey of conspiracy theories throughout American history, Hofstadter draws powerful parallels between the past and the present, suggesting that the so-called “paranoid style” is a common and enduring historical current, one that comes in “waves of different intensity, [but] appears to be all but ineradicable.”

While Hofstadter’s modern examination focuses on right-wing political movements in the United States—Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Red Scare and the John Birch Society, for example—he explores antecedents going back to the 1700s that do not fall so neatly on one side or the other of the Left-Right divide, such as anti-Catholic and anti-Masonic movements. Hofstadter stresses that the patterns of conspiratorial thinking he discusses are evident on the political left as well the right, and while he emphasizes American examples of the phenomenon, the paranoid style is by no means unique to the United States.

Hofstadter’s use of the term “paranoid” was qualified as well. He did not mean that those espousing such views were paranoid in the clinical sense. He observed, rather, that “it is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.” Despite this distinction, the “paranoid” in paranoid style evokes something else about conspiracy theories: They carry with them a pejorative undertone that is probably unavoidable. As a form of stigmatized knowledge, conspiracy theories often exact a social cost from those espousing them. The conspiracist is frequently seen as mentally unhinged or otherwise to be avoided. Hofstadter does not shy away from such characterizations and can be openly dismissive of the conspiracy theorist. He is careful to point out, however, that “there are conspiratorial acts in history, and there is nothing paranoid about taking note of them.”

Beyond the “more or less normal” characterization, the major difference between clinical paranoia and the paranoid style is one of emphasis. According to Hofstadter,

the political paranoiac and the clinical paranoiac "tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression." The clinical paranoiac, however, "sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*," while the political paranoiac believes the target is not himself, but rather "a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others."

As an example of the paranoid style in action, Hofstadter describes a group of men from Bagdad, Arizona, who drove all the way to Washington, D.C., in 1964 to testify against proposed gun control legislation championed by Connecticut senator Thomas E. Dodd. The measure sought to tighten the rules regulating the purchase and sale of mail-order firearms. Given that Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's alleged assassin, had purchased his rifle through the mail under an alias, the Dodd bill, whatever its shortcomings, had the "color of conventional political reasoning," in Hofstadter's words, and could be viewed as a rational reaction to a demonstrable problem. Nevertheless, one of the Arizonans failed to see the issue in such a light. Testifying before the US Senate, he registered his opposition to the measure, declaring that the Dodd bill represented "a further attempt by a subversive power to make us part of one world socialistic government." He alleged the measure would "create chaos" and embolden the enemies of the United States in their plot to gain control over the levers of government.

Even today, nearly fifty years after this testimony, the fears it expresses are familiar. Trepidation over a one-world government remains a common theme in conspiracy theories of the current era, as demonstrated by belief in the alleged New World Order (NWO) or the North American Union (NAU) plots. So, too, is the tendency to perceive the most modest of measures as a potential Trojan horse, a subterfuge designed by conspirators as a means of seizing power.

To Hofstadter, the Arizonan's testimony reflected the larger paranoid style at work and recalled conspiracy theories from earlier in American history. Of particular importance is the alleged conspiracy's "central image," in this case a subversive plot to establish "a one world socialistic government." Within the paranoid style, according to Hofstadter, this central image is "a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life."

To the conspiracist, Hofstadter observes, "history is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power." Given the size and influence of these forces, the conspiracy theorist believes that only an apocalyptic struggle—a crusade—is capable of thwarting the nefarious plot.

Along with the apocalyptic warnings, there is an undercurrent in the paranoid style of a feeling of powerlessness. As Hofstadter observes, "Time is forever running out." As a witness to the conspiracy, the conspiracist is one of the elect, one of the few who understands the insidious and overarching might of the conspirators. Confronted by the vast plot, however, conspiracists know that they probably lack the influence to counteract it, to rally the necessary crusade to defeat it. The docile public remains largely aloof from the conspiracy theorists' dire warnings, paying

them little heed or ignoring them altogether. According to Hofstadter, the conspiracy theorist “has little real hope that his evidence will convince a hostile world.” The plotters, meanwhile, continue to accumulate power, manipulating the media, the educational system, and other levers of power, moving with single-minded intensity toward the realization of their scheme. Thus, Hofstadter notes, the “apocalypticism of the paranoid style runs dangerously near to hopeless pessimism, but usually stops short of it.”

Within this sense of hopelessness is another element of the paranoid style: a profound and grudging respect for the conspirators. Though their aims are sinister, the conspirators are admirably clever, even brilliant, and worthy of emulation. As Hofstadter observes, “A fundamental paradox of the paranoid style is the imitation of the enemy.” Two important examples of this phenomenon, Hofstadter notes, can be found in Joseph McCarthy and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). As an anti-Communist who often targeted the intellectual elite, McCarthy nevertheless couched his denunciations in the terms of academia, including extensive footnotes to give his work a scholarly air. The KKK, similarly, began as an anti-Catholic organization, but in opposing the church took on some of its most obvious attributes, placing a heavy emphasis on ritualized ceremonies.

Though some behaviors of the conspirators are worthy of imitation, conspiracists spare nothing when characterizing the plotters’ crimes. “Much of the function of the enemy,” Hofstadter writes, “lies not in what can be imitated but in what can be wholly condemned.” In the paranoid style, the Mason, the Roman Catholic, the Communist, the enemy in whatever form, is both bloodthirsty and sexually licentious. Rape and butchery are employed without qualm. The practices are so brutal that there would seem to be no hope for the conspirator’s redemption. Their sins are too great to be purged.

Except when they repent. Another paradox in the paranoid style is the value placed on defectors. As awful as the agents of the conspiracy are, those who abandon the cause, whatever their past sins, are embraced by the conspiracists. Hofstadter points out how the anti-Masons and anti-Catholics relied on former Masons or supposed runaway nuns and excommunicated priests, whether credible or not, to describe the inner workings of the underlying plot to which they formerly contributed. Who better to reveal the conspiracy than a former conspirator? In Hofstadter’s time, the accounts of ex-Communists were eagerly accepted and disseminated by anti-Communists, while in today’s politics, where the paranoid style flourishes, the accounts of apostate liberals or conservatives are held up as proof positive of the other side’s malevolence. “Such converts,” Hofstadter states in speaking of these defectors, “remind one of those ancient converts from paganism to Christianity of whom it is told that upon their conversion they did not entirely cease to believe in their old gods but converted them into demons.”

Lastly, one of the paranoid style’s foremost qualities, according to Hofstadter, is its reliance on the factual record, on real evidence. The veracity of the defrocked priest, the ex-Communist, or the former Mason may be subject to doubt, but it cannot be completely discounted. McCarthy did not abandon the art of deduction

and inference when he authored his assaults on alleged Communist conspiracies. "Paranoid writing," Hofstadter observes, "begins with certain defensible judgments." From these logical starting points, the paranoid style leaps from one inference to the next until a grand conspiracy that neatly divides the world in two is revealed. Hofstadter notes, too, that much as the paranoid style rests, however awkwardly, on actual evidence, the conflicts it evokes are equally real.

Anti-Catholic agitation served in one measure as a reaction to immigration. It also raised a probing question as to whether the religion was compatible with republican government. Given its hierarchical structure and the influence of ecclesiastical authority, this question may have had some legitimacy in a nineteenth-century context. To some, the values of Catholicism and democracy were not perfectly in sync and were hard to reconcile. But in the paranoid style, more rational concerns were drowned out by breathless talk of lecherous nuns, murderous priests, and a papal plot to turn the United States into a monarchy under the thumb of Rome.

The anti-Masons raised concerns of similar import. The ranks of the Masons were filled with society's elite, and according to their oaths they were, in Hofstadter's words, "bound by special obligations" to one another. Such arrangements, secret as they were, could be conceived as a threat to more democratic relationships and to civil society. Of course, again, these concerns were not openly expressed, but were channeled into tales of Masonic orgies and ritual murders. So while the conflicts that motivate conspiracy theories may be real, how they are presented can stretch the bounds of credibility. As Hofstadter remarks, "We are all sufferers from history, but the [conspiracist] is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well."

Conspiracy Theories: An Overview

By Micah Issit

Points of View: Conspiracy Theories, 2011

A conspiracy theory seeks to explain a disputed event as a plot by a secret group or alliance rather than an individual or isolated act. Conspiracy theories of various kinds have been part of human culture for centuries. The struggle against conspiracies, whether real or imagined, has become a standard model in literary fiction, while the belief in actual conspiracies is a type of social phenomenon.

Conspiracy theories serve a number of functions. In some cases, conspiracy theories can be used to express suspicion and anger toward a dominant social group or to express frustration with perceived powerlessness within society. Conspiracy theories have been used by those in power to justify the persecution of targeted groups. In a more fundamental sense, conspiracy theories express a basic desire to uncover mysteries and secrets hidden within the generally accepted explanations of historical events.

History

In Western society, the fascination with conspiracy theories became pronounced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is some debate over when the term conspiracy theory was coined, but it is generally believed to have arisen in the early twentieth century. According to historian Daniel Pipes, most Western conspiracy theories were created between 1815 and 1945, a period during which numerous conspiratorial ideas and theories proliferated. During this time, popular historians spawned a number of theories that sought to explain many of history's major events, including wars, genocide, and shifts in political power, in light of conspiracies enacted by secret societies.

However, some of history's most persistent conspiracy theories originated before the eighteenth century. Some historians have suggested that fear of a plot by the Jewish elite to seize control of Christian Europe played a role in motivating citizens to take part in the Crusades (1095–1291). The theory was later used by the Nazis to justify the Holocaust; it has also been used in the twenty-first century by some extreme anti-Semitic groups to justify mistrust or hatred of Jewish people.

During and after the French Revolution (1789–1799), it was suggested that several powerful groups were instigating revolutionary violence in order to benefit from the resulting shifts in power. It was during this period that two groups, the Freemasons and the Illuminati, gained infamy as two of the world's most powerful secret societies.

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The Freemasons are one of the oldest known and most mysterious fraternal organizations in the world. The society's history is shrouded in uncertainty; some claim that the group originated as early as the tenth century CE, while other historians place the society's origins closer to the sixteenth century. Membership in the Freemasons is closed to all but those nominated by other members. Masonic meetings and rituals were a closely guard-

ed secret for centuries. Masonic society is based on the belief in a supreme being, and is dedicated to upholding just laws. As of 2007, the Masonic order had thousands of members operating in chapters around the world.

The Bavarian Illuminati, founded in 1776 by law professor Adam Weishaupt, was a fraternal society of intellectuals dedicated to rational analysis of politics and society. The organization drew its members from the intellectual elite and counted a number of prominent politicians and philosophers among its members. Because meetings of secret societies were prohibited in Bavaria (a German state), the Illuminati were considered a criminal organization. The Bavarian Illuminati were involved in a number of movements to alter the balance of political power in Bavaria.

Because the Freemasons and the Illuminati were extremely secretive and counted a number of influential political and social figures among their membership, many people believed that both groups were capable of exerting tremendous influence on societal development. Throughout the eighteenth century, both groups were the subject of hundreds of fictionalized stories. In such stories, the secret societies were described as villainous organizations involved in a plot for global domination or personal benefit until foiled by a heroic character or group.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the American political landscape was rife with conspiracy theories. From the American Revolution until the Civil War, many politicians and citizens believed that European governments were attempting to infiltrate and cause the downfall of the American government. Some Americans also likened the Catholic Church to a foreign monarchy, in which the pope served as a sovereign. Many Americans opposed Catholic immigration; they believed that Catholics, acting on the behalf of the pope, would undermine or try to overthrow the government, which was dominated by Protestant officials. Belief in the Catholic conspiracy led to the development of several anti-Catholic political parties, the most prominent of which, the Know Nothing Party, had a substantial impact on politics during the mid 1800s.

During the Cold War (1940s–1980s), many Americans believed that there was a plot among communist leaders to gain control of the United States government through covert agents functioning as US citizens. During the 1940s and 1950s, Senator Joe McCarthy prompted a number of Senate hearings aimed at uncovering communist activity in the United States. Thousands of US citizens were detained and questioned

on suspicion of involvement in anti-American activities. Years later, the McCarthy trials became symbolic of how conspiracy theories can lead to paranoia and persecution.

In the 1960s, the United States and rival nations, such as the Soviet Union, raced to be the first country to successfully explore space and land an astronaut on the moon. In the 1990s, some conspiracy theorists began to propose that the 1969 US moon landing never occurred. It was suggested that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), in conjunction with the federal government, filmed the moon landing in a movie studio in order to convince foreign governments that the United States had won the race into outer space. The moon landing theory has persisted into the twenty-first century.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the focus of conspiracy theories arising within the United States shifted from the belief that foreign agents were trying to influence US politics to the notion that the US government was manipulating the populace to fuel the advancement of individual politicians or political lineages. In some polls, American trust in the government fell from close to 80 percent in the 1950s to less than 25 percent in the late 1990s.

The 1963 assassination of US President John F. Kennedy became the basis for one of the most famous conspiracy theories in American history. Numerous books, films, and journalistic investigations attempted to illustrate key points that either supported or refuted the conspiratorial angle. This conspiracy theory is especially notable in that theorists often accuse the US government and its operative organizations of carrying out the assassination.

Historically, conspiracy theories are more common in periods of social unrest or change. During times of political or social crisis, conspiracy theories may arise among groups that believe they are at a political or social disadvantage in comparison to other groups judged to have a superior social status. In other cases, conspiracy theories may be used to justify the persecution of a group that has been politically or militarily targeted. Though conspiracy theories persist, in the twenty-first century, a majority of Americans consider most conspiracy theories to be a product of fiction or paranoia rather than a viable explanation for political or social events.

Conspiracy Theories Today

The 2000 election was one of the most closely-contested presidential races in American history. Because of numerous voting irregularities, some suggested that George W. Bush and his supporters in the conservative political community conspired to rig the election in his favor. Allegations of conspiracy with regard to Bush and his political allies occurred again after the terrorist attacks of 2001, when they were accused of having prior knowledge of the attacks. Most political analysts view these conspiracy theories as little more than an example of paranoia and increasing distrust of the government on the part of some segments of the American populace.

Though many feel that modern conspiracy theories represent extreme cynicism and skepticism and are generally based on apocryphal beliefs, history is punctuated with evidence of verified conspiracies aimed at influencing political developments. Evidence suggests that secret or covert groups around the world remain engaged in

conspiratorial enterprises with the goal of influencing political, economic, or social change. Whether modern conspiracies can be linked to secret societies such as the Freemasons or other sociopolitical conglomerations is a matter of debate and investigation.

Historians have suggested that conspiracy theories are a natural outgrowth of a human desire to explore and uncover facets of experience that remain unexplained. Others suggest that such theories are the product of frustrations related to the secretive nature of some political, social and historical organizations and operations. In addition, conspiracy theories have had an enduring aesthetic appeal as a plot device for fiction and as an expression of the mythic struggle between good and evil. Whether in reference to actual conspiracies or fictional accounts of secret covenants, the perpetuation of conspiracy theories reflects both the human desire to pursue and untangle any mystery and the uneven distribution of power and influence within society.

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