

The Role of Anti-Establishment “Conspiracy Theories”

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Theme: [History](#)

In recent years, populist explanations for world events have become common and often taken the form of anti-establishment conspiracy theories. The contradiction between how people believe the world should be, according to the mainstream propaganda pertaining to liberty and democracy, and how it is in this time of crisis leads people to search for easily digestible answers.

It's easy for conspiracy theorists to play on people's fears and prejudices and to point fingers at certain groups. In the past, it has been 'the Jews', 'the Irish', 'the blacks', 'the Poles' or some other easily identifiable target that was blamed for society's ills. Resorting to selective interpretations of history or some simplistic Hollywood-esque inspired political or sci-fi narrative where giant reptiles are taking over the planet can be quite seductive, particularly for 'right-leaning' sections of the population who never had any truck with socialism and probably once believed in the 'free market' and capitalist liberal democracy but now have trouble in fathoming out why it has all gone wrong.

Conspiracy theories of different kinds have been found on both the left and the right of the political spectrum over the decades. While the right saw reds under the bed everywhere, the left regarded every negative event as a consequence of capitalism – what sociologists call 'left functionalism'.

Much of the left, however, possesses an analysis based on a sound understanding of how capitalism works and developed over time. David Harvey's assessment of the current crisis (1) uses concepts of capital over accumulation, production outsourcing, wage and demand depression and credit access to explain why we are where we happen to be right now. John Foster (2) discusses the nature of the current crisis in similar terms.

The advocates of populist conspiracy theories seek to explain everything in terms of secret societies and codes, Zionism, 'communism' or the hand of 'Rothschild'. Of course, families like the Rothschilds and Rockefellers and groups like Bilderberg exist and do hold great power. That much is not in dispute. However, the nature of the dynamics of power is. Groups or think tanks like Bilderberg, Brookings Institute, Trilateral Commission, Chatham House, Council on Foreign Relations, RAND Corporation and so on are where capitalism's state-corporate hegemony, including the rich families mentioned above, meet to discuss, devise policies and manage capitalism.

Radical critiques of society have often focused on the underlying logic and processes of capital accumulation and capitalist economic crises as well as capitalism's inherent contradictions. An analysis of the historical antecedents of modernity according to scholarly analysis has also been prevalent. Today, it is popular to assert that the members of some

shadowy group have been in charge all this time – the Illuminati, often used as a metaphor for ‘the Jews’.

The rise of such explanations are understandable in a complex world, where the ordinary person feels utterly powerless, confused and craves easy answers. Little surprise then that events and crises are said to be the work of some sinister ‘Illuminati’, an explanation which tends to steer clear of any genuine analysis of capitalism.

In the West, jobs are being outsourced, wages are falling and unemployment rising. As the market becomes saturated with goods and demand is unable to mop up supply, firms go bust. There is a shift towards powerful monopoly capitalism, while citizens and workers experience increasing powerlessness and immiseration. And to seek out new profits, imperialist ventures abroad become the norm. State-corporate monopoly capitalism and imperialist intent are not part of a ‘New World Order’ but are part of a world in which the few benefit at the expense of the many and that has been in the making ever since Britain became the first industrial nation and capitalism emerged.

But what we now have isn’t free market capitalism, some might say. The notion of the free market has always been a myth. It’s always been controlled and manipulated. It’s never been ‘free’. And we are now witnessing advanced capitalism in all its gore.

Capitalism has inherent contradictions. All was never intended to be fine. Remember the slogan to end poverty by 2020 (or whatever the date was)? Capitalism thrives on poverty. It’s integral to the system. That’s why it is rampant in the West and much more so in the cheap labour economies of the ‘developing world’. The increasing concentration of power, ownership and wealth and the rising impoverishment of the masses is one of capitalism’s greatest contradictions. It’s not some kind of conspiracy to keep the masses in poverty or in fear of falling into it. It’s built in to capitalism.

But many do not refer Marx, Engels, Lenin or Trotsky to gain an understanding of the processes of dialectic materialism and capitalism. They and their theories are regarded as being part of the Zionist conspiracy. If socialism and communism are the creation of Zionism, which supposedly exerts so much control over the US and Britain, strange then that the secret services of both the US and Britain spent so much time and energy on infiltrating, deradicalising and subverting the left (3).

While the late Antony C Sutton (sometimes regarded as the father of modern conspiracy theories) provides food for thought in his writings and research (4), conspiracy theories tend to provide limited insight into the dynamics of power and oppression in the 21st century.

However imperfect the work of people like Robert Brenner (5) and Barrington Moore (6) may have been, their research was based on broad comparative sociological analysis of the cultural, historical, agrarian and economic factors that led to the rise of capitalism, fascism and communism in various societies. In the absence of this, however, prominent proponents of conspiracy theories in the US and Britain make crude assumptions about such phenomena comprising part of an Illuminati plot, which play on the prejudices and fears of ordinary people, who in turn latch on to the explanation offered as a proxy for the underlying causes of their powerlessness and frustrations.

Why bother having an informed understanding of the dynamics of the modern world based on rigorous research? Much easier to watch a few YouTube clips about some secret,

manipulative elite or even amphibians from outer space with an agenda to control the world.

Many conspiracy theorists have indeed actually been quite informative on how the banking system works and how bankers conspire to control policies by keeping governments in permanent debt. They have also highlighted glaring flaws in official accounts of 9/11. They have rightly pinpointed what the mainstream misses out of its narratives and have raised issues that many on the left had tended to ignore or gave scant attention to. But such useful insights then become wrapped up in theories that too often appear to be based on flights of fancy.

There is no doubting that people can and do conspire to shape events. Not everything can be explained by structures where individual motive is eradicated. For example, corporations conspire to produce price cartels, media barons conspire to dominate and state-corporate interests embark on military jaunts to control markets and resources. And yes, bankers conspire to restrict credit for various reasons. But this has to be placed within the wider context of Empire and capitalism.

In capitalism, the compulsion to compete, dominate and pursue profit casts long shadows over virtually every social and cultural institution, from government and politics to education, law, agriculture and entertainment.

Conspiracy theorists and their followers may well appreciate aspects of this, but merely speculate about the intentions of and actions of groups of people without addressing how capitalism shapes any of it.

In finishing it is interesting to recall that not everything in life can be neatly explained away, as the philosopher Karl Popper once famously argued. It can be easy for conspiracy theories to overlook the pervasive unintended consequences of political and social action and assume that all consequences must have been intended. Unpredictability abounds. And that's something some on the left may care to occasionally chew over too.

Notes

1) David Harvey (2010), Crises of Capitalism: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOP2V_np2c0

2) John Foster (2010), Capitalist Crisis and Cuts: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkhmGOxwbhM>

3) Robin Ramsay (1996), The influence of intelligence services on the British left, Lobster Magazine: <http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/articles/rrtalk.htm>

4) Antony C Sutton (1974), Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution: http://reformed-theology.org/html/books/bolshevik_revolution/index.html

5) Robert Brenner (1976), "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe". *Past and Present* 70

6) Barrington Moore (1993) [First published 1966]. [Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world](#) (with a new foreword by Edward Friedman and James C. Scott ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.

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