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EDITED BY PETER KNIGHT

CONSPIRACY NATION

The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America



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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists Peter Knight	1
Theories of Conspiracy Theory	
1 Spinning Paranoia: The Ideologies of Conspiracy and Contingency in Postmodern Culture Skip Willman	21
2 A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping Fran Mason	40
3 Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy Timothy Melley	57
Alien Nation	
4 If Anything Is Possible Jodi Dean	85
5 "My Body Is Not My Own": Alien Abduction and the Struggle for Self-Control Bridget Brown	107
The Enemy Within	
6 Injections and Truth Serums: AIDS Conspiracy Theories and the Politics of Articulation Jack Bratich	133
7 White Hope: Conspiracy, Nationalism, and Revolution in <i>The Turner Diaries</i> and <i>Hunter</i> Ingrid Walker Fields	157

disease, it is an airborne virus, it can be transmitted through eating utensils), which can lead to severely destructive behavioral practices.

Douglass also has perhaps the strongest right-wing politics of all the conspiracy theorists, believing AIDS to be part of a communist plot to destroy Western civilization (even after the collapse of the Soviet Union). In addition, as Gilbert notes, his prescriptions for action primarily involve establishing and strengthening law-and-order policies.³² Furthermore, Douglass offers a hodgepodge of general reactionary calls to save Western civilization (including military action against Russia, the abolishment of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and anti-Mexican immigration policies). Thus, Douglass functions as an excellent representative of the worst of conspiracy theories, especially for the left-leaning readership of *CAQ*. His well-deserved repugnance, however, begins to function as representative of conspiracy theories in general, as the next section on politics develops.

Gilbert uses Douglass's reactionary theory as a springboard for a discussion of contemporary populist struggles. Linking Douglass to Lyndon LaRouche through their mutual reliance on the prominent AIDS conspiracy theorist Robert Strecker, M.D., Gilbert begins to articulate AIDS conspiracy theories firmly to the contemporary right-wing movement in the United States. The familiar figure of Bo Gritz is then trotted out, linking these theories to the then-hyped militia movement and further entrenching the articulation to right-wing politics.³³ After a brief meditation on the danger of being seduced by the Right's populist, "attractive mantle of 'militant anti-government movement,'" Gilbert restates his main thesis: "Whatever the right's motives, the practical consequences are clear: There is a definite correlation between believing these myths and a failure to take proven, life saving preventive measures. In the end, the lies promulgated by the likes of Douglass, Strecker, and LaRouche kill" (62). The argument cements its articulation between AIDS conspiracy accounts and a particular political position within the deadly effects that necessarily flow from believing in these theories.

The rest of the article goes on to elaborate thoroughly on what the "real" genocide is, providing a meticulous account of the numerous factors contributing to the horrific living conditions facing poor African Americans today, and the criminally negligent public health and political system's role in furthering the AIDS epidemic. The article concludes with a call for grassroots organizing and peer education, while decrying

"the fundamentally right-wing conspiracy theories of Dr. Douglass and the like that lead us on a wild goose chase for the little men in white coats in a secret lab," and which (once again) "divert people from identifying and fighting back against the real genocide" (64). Through condescension (one is reminded of people talking about "little green men") and an urgent political warning, Gilbert reiterates his articulations with a sense of alarm and an appeal to the authority of the "real."

In summary, why spend so much time on one article? Gilbert, I believe, has provided the most cogent and serious treatment of the topic of AIDS conspiracy theories from the Left that I have come across. It encapsulates in an impassioned and persuasive manner the assumptions and articulations made offhandedly by others in the sociological approach to conspiracy theories. Unlike the mainstream articulations performed on conspiracy theories, Gilbert's argument does not dismiss them out of hand through a transposed clinical term like "paranoia." He takes them on as a significant set of political claims, ones that sprout from and respond to the same conditions as his own analysis (and by extension, the Left's). Unfortunately, he quickly depicts them as a *competing* set of claims (in fact a *competing framework*), ones that mistakenly and simplistically assess their own conditions. Furthermore, he attributes deadly effects to these mistaken beliefs, giving them the power of life and death in altering behavior. Finally, he locates these beliefs in a right-wing political position, turning his perceived competitor into an enemy. The reader needs to tease out these linkages from this article to foreground the politics of articulation, and to elaborate the political stakes involved in these particular conceptual procedures.

One of the stakes of this article's articulations is most prominent in Gilbert's discussion of the contemporary right wing in the section entitled "Sign of the Times." This section is a surprisingly tangential moment in an otherwise cogently structured argument. But its very "straying" gives us an insight into what is at issue in this entire meditation on AIDS conspiracy theories. In a "Right woos Left" logic reminiscent of Chip Berlet's account of LaRouchite politics, Gilbert depicts the Right as a seductive force on the terrain of radical politics.³⁴ In his own conspiratological moment, Gilbert asserts that "the 'Populists' use anti-business rhetoric to try to recruit from the left," having "the attractive mantle of 'militant anti-government movement,'" and claims that "the right

has co-opted the critique of big government and big business" (62). AIDS conspiracy theories, then, are merely one more instrument that the Right uses to appear radical and divert energies away from "real" problems (i.e., those that come under the Left's domain).

The "dangerous diversion" that AIDS conspiracy theories present, then, is not primarily a distraction from AIDS activism or prevention, but from "real" analysis and politics (i.e., left politics). Gilbert is concerned with a loss of discursive authority; his articulation of conspiracy theories to the Right is a preventative maneuver. It positions conspiracy theories in the opposition's camp so as to reduce their powers of seduction to those who are Left-identified. Rather than exploring a way to link AIDS origin stories to the concerns and strategies of a left politics, Gilbert finds that not only are origin stories unarticulatable to left concerns, they are in this case *antagonistic* to those concerns. Rather than assessing if and how an origin story could contribute to an ongoing project of defining the contemporary social-political-economic context, this articulation claims that an origin story produces an entirely different context, one that diverts attention from the real one. As such, this diversion needs conceptual policing: it is thus positioned as belonging to the enemy, as life-threatening, as *left-threatening*.

At stake in Gilbert's article, then, is the very identity, stability, and legitimacy of the Left in the chaotic contemporary political structure. The political spectrum anchored by Left and Right finds itself in jeopardy, often through the emergence of conspiracy theories.³⁵ Eschewing a politics of articulation, Gilbert's article performs articulations through an identity politics, in which certain narratives have at their core a determined set of effects, and which are located in an identifiable and essential position in the political field.³⁶ Rather than open the Left up to critique and rearticulation with other subjugated knowledges, this article wishes to place the Left squarely within the dominant regime of truth (as having authority, even scientific, against competing subjugated claims). The article seeks to position the Left as the sanctioned bearer of correct analysis, as well as the legitimate judge of the truth of radical politics.

CRITERIA AND ARTICULATION

Thus far my analysis has focused on foregrounding the articulations and the attendant political stakes of one problematization of AIDS con-

spiracy theories. I have concentrated on this argument by Gilbert as a way of explicating the conceptual procedures that further contribute to the subjugation of a subjugated knowledge, in the name of preserving the Left's identity. But this is only half of Foucault's framework for comprehending subjugated knowledges (i.e., analyzing the subjugating practices). The second part would be to try and answer the question, "What is there to the knowledge outside its subjugated status?" That is, what can we say about the knowledge's positivity, or, within the concerns I have here, how do we judge the politics and articulability of a conspiracy theory? What criteria can be employed in evaluating a set of political claims?

First, I would reiterate the methodological value discussed at the beginning of this essay. There may be no *general* criteria for the *general* category of "conspiracy theory," as the question of what a conspiracy theory *is* is already a matter of articulation (i.e., it has no identity as an object). General criteria would still adhere to "a principle of interiority or essentialism which locates any practice in a structure of necessity and guarantees its effects even before it has been enacted."³⁷ A different framework is needed, one that would not be something like interpretation (guided by the traditional metaphysical question "What is?"), but evaluation ("Which one?").³⁸ It "never consists in interpreting, but merely in asking what are your lines . . . and what are the dangers on each?"³⁹ And this evaluation is performed "not in the manner of a moralist, but that of a metallurgist or an assayer: the question is never simply one of good or bad, but the specificity of each case."⁴⁰ Thus it is important to not assume a narrative's identity, effects, and politics, but to assess accounts and groups on a case-by-case basis.

This approach based in a politics of articulation would need to employ a different set of criteria. It would not necessarily work to establish the validity or the desirability of conspiracy theories, but neither would it assume an agenda of identifying and differentiating them from left politics *at the outset*. It would assume that there is no necessary relation between an AIDS origin story and political effects, nor between the *desire* for an origin story and political effects. A particular conspiracy theory could be a diversion from a set of political concerns, but it could also be a complement, even a catalyst for new forms of analysis and activism.⁴¹ Thus, this approach is not a call to embrace conspiracy theories, but to embrace a politics of articulation,

requests funding "to make a new infective microorganism which . . . might be refractory to the immunological and therapeutic processes upon which we depend to maintain our relative freedom from infectious disease." House Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on Department of Defense Appropriations for 1970*, 91st Cong., 1st sess., H.B. 15090, Part 5, Research, Development, Test and Evaluation, Dept. of the Army, 1969. In Leonard Horowitz, *Emerging Viruses: AIDS and Ebola* (Rockport, MA: Tetrahedron, 1996).

29. I do not doubt Gilbert's experience of Douglass's prominence, but I do want to mention the former's selectivity among the variety of AIDS conspiracy theories, as it allows him to make generalizing statements about AIDS conspiracy theories.

30. Unfortunately, Gilbert does not give a citation for this study. However, I did come across a similar one done at the University of California, Davis (and here again I am greatly indebted to Paula Treichler for bringing this to my attention in her ceaseless efforts to keep me abreast of AIDS conspiracy theory developments): Gregory M. Herek and John P. Capitanio, "Conspiracies, Contagion, and Compassion: Trust and Public Reactions to AIDS," *AIDS Education and Prevention* 6 (1994): 565-75. This study purported to correlate AIDS-related distrust to beliefs about casual-contact transmission, and to personal risk reduction behaviors. Though it did find that "the distrust is strongly associated with AIDS-related beliefs and attitudes," this distrust was limited to distrust of doctors and the fact that information about AIDS was being withheld (572). It found that "[b]eliefs about casual contact were not related" to beliefs in "the genocidal purpose of AIDS," and "distrust was unrelated to whether or not respondents reported behavior changes" (572). The authors, however, still speculated that the lack of trust in health educators "springs from suspicions" about "malicious intent" on the part of the government (573). Rather than question the relation between health practitioners and the state, this study, in its will to resecure the authority of those health practitioners, still seeks to locate conspiratorial beliefs as the source of the problems.

31. The use of the phrase "false conspiracy theories" appears to be a redundancy in this argument. But read another way, it could signify the possibility of true conspiracy theories. Perhaps, on this reading, we need better, truer conspiracy narratives?

32. These proposals include mandatory HIV testing, quarantining HIV-positive people, removal of HIV-positive children from school, and antiprostitution measures ranging from harsher imprisonment to execution.

33. This article appeared during a time when much media attention (from both the mainstream press and left-leaning journalism) was focused on the American militia movement (of which Bo Gritz was a key member/metonym). Since the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995 much conceptual work was being performed to unequivocally locate this multifarious assemblage of

groups and interests within the right-wing camp. As I have argued elsewhere, this approach abandoned a political project of articulation in favor of preserving the Left's identity. Jack Bratich, "Democratic Fallout: Militias and Right Monitors" (paper presented at the 46th annual meeting of the International Communications Association, Chicago, May 1996).

34. See, for example, Chip Berlet, "Friendly Fascists," *Progressive* 56, no. 6 (June 1992): 16-20; Chip Berlet and Joel Bellman, "Lyndon LaRouche: Fascism Wrapped in an American Flag," *A Political Research Associates Briefing Paper*, 10 March 1989.

35. This troubling of the Left/Right distinction by conspiracy theories has even been given a name, "fusion paranoia." See Michael Kelly, "The Road to Paranoia," *New Yorker*, 19 June 1995, 60-75.

36. Interestingly enough, Gilbert's article even demonstrates the various political positions espoused by conspiracy theories. At one point, when Gilbert discusses Jakob and Lilli Segal, early proponents of the HIV splice theory, he places them in a communist context, even hinting that this theory was promoted as Soviet disinformation. Later, however, Douglass's appropriation of this splice theory is firmly rooted in an anticommunist framework. Even in the starkly divided political context of the Cold War, there is no necessary relation between an AIDS origin story and a political position.

37. Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Outta This Place*, 52.

38. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 75-76.

39. Gilles Deleuze, "Toward Freedom," in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 253.

40. Patton, "Conceptual Politics," 79.

41. Take, for example, Tetrahedron, Inc., a nonprofit educational corporation headed by Dr. Leonard Horowitz, author of the above-mentioned conspiracy narrative tome *Emerging Viruses*. This group, according to its letterhead, provides employee assistance and education, professional development seminars, and health education products and programs, and organizes Horowitz's extensive lecture tours. Or consider the Brotherly Lovers, an AIDS activist group based in Philadelphia, who have attempted to spearhead a class-action lawsuit in which they would petition for a government investigation into the possible artificial origin of HIV. See Eric Taylor, "PWAs vs. the USA," *Paranoia: The Conspiracy Reader* 2, no. 4 (winter 1994-95): 52-54.

42. Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, ed. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 233. My gratitude goes to Treichler for prompting me to think in these criteria-oriented terms.

43. *Ibid.*, 190.