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Conspiracy Theories



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From time immemorial, people have plotted together, unlawfully, treacherously, and surreptitiously, in order to further generally nefarious objectives. In other words, conspiracies happen.

Sometimes they never come to light; more often, they do, but only after, sometimes long after, they are executed or aborted. And sometimes they happen in plain view.

The term has negative connotations. Inasmuch as conspirators generally conspire for what they take to be worthwhile purposes, this is odd, to say the least. But the dictionaries insist.

Those who speak of “conspiracy theories” nowadays seldom dwell on conspirators’ surreptitiousness or treachery. This hardly casts the term in a more positive light, however. Conspirators’ evil ways may not be Topic A, but their craziness is. It is the kind of craziness commonly associated with paranoia.

It goes without saying that the conspiracy theories we have lately heard so much about are almost always false, usually in obvious, but not always in uncomplicated, ways.

Like paranoid delusions, good conspiracy theories fit the known facts, or some pertinent subset of them, tolerably well. They could even be defended for putting the facts they focus upon together in more cogent ways than more plausible explanations do. This is especially the case when the more plausible explanations are incomplete or otherwise problematic.

For example, because there were oddities about the way the buildings collapsed in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center that could arguably be accounted for better by explosive devices on site than by the televised collision with a hijacked airliner, conspiracy theories started appearing almost from Day One. Inasmuch as the collision was seen by millions, countless times as the cable networks replayed their video evidence, it was hard to deny that a collision occurred.

One would expect that this would have stopped conspiracy theorists in their tracks. Perhaps it has to some extent, but not one hundred percent. When determined, conspiracy theorists are nothing if not ingenious.

Their ingenuity often works because there are usually ways to combine conspiracy theories with evidence that even the most gullible people are unable entirely to reject.

Thus, with 9/11, it was sometimes argued that even if the video evidence wasn’t entirely made up – photo shopped, as it were, concocted just to mislead the public and to throw investigators off track — that the planes that collided with the buildings were not what ultimately brought those building down; that, contrary to what people saw, explosive devices planted by terrorists within the buildings themselves were responsible for that.

Why go out on that limb? Part of the explanation may be that conspiracy theorists are contrarian by nature. A larger part is that they also tend to be wedded to fixed, ideologically or theologically driven beliefs that they will stand by come what may.

Being generally more interested in getting people to think in certain ways than in discovering or clarifying what is or was actually the case, why would they not? Thus, conspiracy theories are almost always tendentious, if not downright fraudulent.

Because their proponents take themselves to be accountable, above all, to political agendas, rather than to getting matters of fact right, they are therefore often indifferent to the truth, except insofar as true claims are generally more convincing than false ones.

In this, as in so much else of political consequence, ironies abound. Thus, except in those comparatively rare instances in which conspiracy theories are contrived in propaganda mills or their functional equivalents in order to bring about certain results, conspiracy theories seldom have much to do with actual conspiracies, in the strictest sense of the term.

When they function politically, it is more usually in the course of spontaneously evolving turns of events than, as would be the case were plotters behind the goings on, with thoughtful determination.

The idea that Trump, not Biden, actually won the last election, “the Big Lie,” as it has come to be called, is an extreme example.

There is not a scintilla of evidence supporting that contention (unless the “gut feelings” of Trump besotted cultists count). Moreover, of the sixty-two lawsuits Trump and his allies have filed challenging the presidential election, sixty-one have failed – dismissed on the merits or for lack of standing. The one that more or less succeeded was on a minor point of no real consequence.

Many of the courts that rejected Trump’s pleadings, including the Supreme Court, are packed with Trump-appointed judges, few if any of whom are paragons of honesty or good sense, and all of whom were vetted by Trump operatives for loyalty to the Dear Leader wannabe.

But the Big Lie exceeds even their capacity to sign on to the all-consuming mendacity that Trump exudes. And so, we got the court rulings we did.

“Too much light blinds us,” wrote Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). He meant that, in the extreme, things turn into their opposite, a point that made him one of the “founding fathers,” as it were, of the dialectical logic that Hegel and Marx and many others would later put to use.

Could some lies be so transparently false that, even if, in the extreme, they do not quite turn into their opposite, they stop functioning as lies altogether. This is what seems to have happened with the Big Lie; it has become nothing more than a rallying cry for those who

care a lot about keeping America on an authoritarian track and could care less about the truth.

Getting that idea across would be the best, perhaps the only, chance that proponents of, say, the QAnon conspiracy theory have for coming out of the current glut of bruhaha that they, egged on by liberals hellbent on ridiculing them, have generated, without looking like a bunch of raving lunatics.

The competition is stiff, but, even so, QAnon is arguably the dumbest conspiracy theory ever to be taken seriously by substantial portions of the citizenry of any purportedly democratic state.

It also provides a sterling example of what the conspiracy theories we hear so much about have become. Whether or not they are entirely or partly true or, as is usually the case, just plain false, is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant. What matters is that they serve as markers of political identity.

This is why so many later-day Republican conservatives can subscribe to them at the same time that they say they believe — and, very likely, do believe — unassailable theories that contradict them.

Trump was a major promoter of the conspiracy theory we now call “birtherism,” the main tenet of which is that because the Constitution requires American presidents to be native born, Barack Obama’s presidency was illegitimate — since he was born in Uganda, not Hawaii, where, of course, he actually was born.

I, for one, would be surprised to learn that Trump actually believes QAnon drivel, but then who really knows what goes on in that “big and very stable” brain of his.

It is not at all surprising, however, that birtherism appeals to older, mainly but not exclusively rural or less educated men and women, who suffer from an increasingly acute sense of the precariousness of their own status positions — as economic circumstances change for the worse for most workers and as “persons of color” assert themselves in white America.

It is unclear what Trump actually believes, but there can be little doubt that his thinking, such as it is, has a certain reptilian quality which enables him to know how to manipulate gullible and pathetic people, like the ones that comprise his vaunted “base.”

Thus, birtherism was useful to him four or five years ago; as much as anything else, including his money, it helped make him a viable candidate for the Republican nomination by bringing conspiracy theories into the political mainstream.

This, in turn, enabled a cult to grow up around the Donald that, in time, became powerful enough to worry the bejesus out of his more mainstream, but no less loathsome, Republican rivals, just as the idea of a Trump presidency has always done for persons whose heads are screwed on right.

How remarkable that they are worried even now, even after the loser lost big time, of falling out of his good graces!

But as the Trump juggernaut took shape in the 2016 campaign against Hillary Clinton, a need to reach beyond the base, even as it was growing like a weed around him, became increasingly apparent even to the Donald and his cohort, their self-deceptions and delusions of grandeur notwithstanding. In those circumstances, Trump and his advisors evidently decided that birtherism was too preposterous to do him much good in the election ahead.

And so, without ever quite rejecting their signature conspiracy theory – except once or twice inconspicuously, when actively pressed – they let it slip into desuetude. It has remained there ever since, coexisting with true beliefs that contradict it.

It is a testament to Trump's luck or cunning or both that he has been able to pull this off as well as he has, and to revel in it. He is evidently proud of himself, and rightly so; not for what he did, but for how well he did it.

“Do I contradict myself?” Walt Whitman asked. “Very well, then,” he went on, “I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes.” Whitman was a great poet; his exuberance overflowed.

Trump is a great nothing, a mediocre conman, who, instead of multitudes, contains nothing except his own, hyper-abundant, megalomaniacal fantasy land. That he contradicts himself is nothing to reflect upon appreciatively, much less to boast about. Trump is pathetic and, at some level, even his own, everyone knows it.

Neither is he any better at conspiracy itself than at forging and defending conspiracy theories.

To be sure, Trump and the miscreants who hang on his every word do seem to have gotten away with their January 6 “insurrection,” at least for now. But they would have to be even bigger fools than we know them to be if they were to think, even for a moment, that their own cleverness was what got them through.

Our electoral system has so many undemocratic characteristics and flaws that it can function not only to impede much needed changes that are broadly desired, but also to

protect insurgents when they are called upon or when they take it upon themselves to further reactionary objectives by going beyond what the system allows.

This had much more to do with how January 6 turned out than the repellent faces, forms, and figures of Donald Trump and his co-conspirators, or their imaginary strategic and tactical genius.

What wretched conspirators those dunces were! What could they have been thinking when they undertook an insurrection after having alienated the most adept and practiced perpetrators and organizers of government overthrows in modern world history — the CIA, their partners in perfidy in other intelligence agencies, the military (without which, in modern times, no coup is possible), the police and other forces of domestic order, and virtually all respectable media outlets?

How could they have thought that it would be enough just to intimidate a few hapless rightwing legislators, and then to rely upon a vice president notable only for his servility, piety, and for never being alone in social contexts with a woman not his wife.

Trump is better at running gaudy casinos and golf resorts than at conspiracy; and as we will likely soon find out, when the forensic accountants get going, he is not and never has been much of a golden boy in real estate either, nor in the hospitality industry and in other areas such as those, in which, until recently, he has had pitifully little to contribute except for his now irrevocably tarnished name.

It is almost enough to make an observer take pity on that poor bastard until the realization dawns, as it must for anyone with a moral compass still intact, that he and his closest confederates, especially those related to him by blood or marriage, will amply deserve every punishment that he and they would get, were justice truly served.

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