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Media Marginalization of Racial Minorities: "Conspiracy Theorists" in U.S. Ghettos and on the "Arab Street"

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The epithet *conspiracy theorist* can be understood as what C. Wright Mills called a “vocabulary of motive.” This vocabulary of motive is routinely used to dismiss scholars, journalists, and citizens who question, or worse yet document, the consolidation or abuse of political, economic, and cultural resources. The micropolitics of the term *conspiracy theory* have become so intense that grassy knoll (a term relating to belief in conspiracy theories about the assassination of President Kennedy) and other terms have become shorthand for those who on the one hand wear “tin-foil hats” to protect themselves from government mind-control rays and for those on the other hand who don’t accept inside-the-Beltway wisdom.

Thus, pointing to Enron’s conspiracy to manipulate the supply of electricity to inflate rates in California is akin to asserting the existence of little green men (for example, see the chapter in this volume by Jesse Walker). Concerned that the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq might indicate broad crimes of state? Concerned that private contractors to the U.S. government are storing “meta-data”—whatever that is—on U.S. citizens? Get off your grassy knoll and come back to reality.

The epithet *conspiracy theorist* is used to tarnish those who challenge authority and power. Often, it is tinged with racial undertones: it is used to demean whole groups of people in the news and to silence, stigmatize, or belittle foreign and minority voices. First, we show why it is important to understand the charge “conspiracy theory” as a vocabulary of motive. Then we show how the phrase works in news coverage to target two particular categories of people: African Americans and people in Muslim-majority nations. Our first case documents the trivializing of concerns of many African Americans about Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) involvement with drug trafficking. Our second case shows how mainstream news frames Muslim-majority nations as populated with irrational conspiracy theorists from primitive cultures, rather than by individuals with well-founded concerns

regarding the “War on Terror.” As a vocabulary of motive, the phrase contributes to the exclusion of oppressed peoples from the community of reasonable participants in democratic discourse.

A Vocabulary of Motive

C. Wright Mills’ essay “Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive” provides an in-road to understanding the ways in which the charge of “conspiracy theorist” polices the boundaries of legitimate debate.¹ Mills argues that, whereas we typically treat motives as simply psychological phenomena—namely the product of the internal workings of individuals—motives are properly understood as social relations:

Rather than fixed elements “in” an individual, motives are the terms with which interpretation of conduct *by social actors* proceeds. . . . [Rather than a biological or psychological account,] what we want is an analysis of the integrating, controlling, and specifying function a certain type of speech fulfils in socially-situated actions. . . . [Motives] themselves must be explained socially.²

When people talk about their own or others’ motives, they do particular things with words—they justify, excuse, hide, impute blame, and avoid or change the subject. Talk about motives is a kind of micropolitical act that does particular kinds of work when invoked in interaction.

Conspiracy theorist is an example of motive talk; it imputes a motive to questions of power and dodges the content of the question in order to shift levels of analysis. The phrase allows an accuser to “go meta” on a speaker by impugning their character, intelligence, and often emotional maturity.³ As a form of the social construction of reality, this discursive move reframes the ongoing definition of the situation, allowing an interactant to “claim the higher ground, or to displace attention from one issue to another, or to prevail in a battle over meanings of a key term.”⁴ In this way mainstream news constructs a form of cultural knowledge that does two kinds of work: maintaining inequalities across race, religion, and nationality, while simultaneously leaving economic, political, and military power unexamined.

The Characteristics of the Conspiracy Theorist

To demonstrate our points, we discuss an examination of 495 articles in the *New York Times* from 2005–2013 to highlight the typical ways *conspiracy theorist* is characterized. It is of course not a flattering portrayal. “Conspiracy theories” are, first and foremost, false. Conspiracy theories are “made up of whole cloth,”⁵ and reason and evidence “debunks many unsubstantiated conspiracy theories.”⁶ They

are “entirely specious and unjustified,”⁷ “wildly counterintuitive,”⁸ and in the end must always “confront the corroborating truth.”⁹ They are often conscious and outrageous lies, amounting to the slander of victims:

... the defense was asking jurors to believe a far-fetched conspiracy theory. In a case with such strong evidence, he said, “you always have to accuse the victims, and you always have to allege a conspiracy. . . .”¹⁰

In this case the victim of such slander, Goldman Sachs, is acknowledged to be “at the center of so many concentric circles of power,” and yet concern about conspiracy and fraud exist only in “the grassy knoll realm of conspiracy theories.”¹¹ This is oft-repeated in the news: “conspiracy theories [are] from the fringe.”¹²

Why would anyone advance a conspiracy theory? The characteristics of the claim result from the characteristics of the claimant—“conspiracy theorists” are “wild-eyed.”¹³ It almost goes without saying that “frenzied paranoia . . . is traditionally associated with conspiracy theory.”¹⁴ Although a bit tongue in cheek, Ginia Bellafante of the *New York Times* suggests that “conspiracy theorists” are insane, when in the course of her article on the television series *The Killing*, she offers parenthetically:

(As a matter of due process it should be said that the series satisfies conspiracy theorists with the .0009 percent chance that [he] is actually not guilty. The sane among us will run, as they say, with the facts on the ground.)¹⁵

Conspiracy theorists are seen as driven by emotion, anger, and vengeance. And they talk quickly. One such “rattled off personal grievances and a bizarre conspiracy theory.”¹⁶ They offer “[theories] tinged with anger.”¹⁷ They traffic in unreasonable and unsubstantiated rumors that encourage a breakdown of rational discourse: “Into that vacuum there were stories with conspiracy theories and other inaccuracies, and the situation became more dramatized.”¹⁸ Emotion takes over, and debate gives way to rumor: “Outrage and conspiracy theories ricocheted around local blogs, online mailing lists and newspapers.”¹⁹ Some conspiracy theorists can seem harmless—simply “accident buffs”²⁰ and “connoisseurs of conspiracy theories.”²¹ But since conspiracy theories are “offensive on their face,”²² there is of course the dark side:

He had changed since high school: the shy, seemingly normal boy had experimented with drugs and, increasingly, with conspiracy theories that made sense to no one but himself.²³

Here, experimentation with drugs is the gateway to conspiracy theorizing, where “[you’ve] drunk the . . .Kool-Aid”²⁴ and you’ve hit rock bottom.

Finally, “conspiracy theorists” are generally deemed guilty by association with other disreputable groups, and other groups are sometimes denigrated by associating them with “conspiracy theorists.” In these stories on former Representative Ron Paul, these techniques are brought into play:

“[He] fired up conspiracy theorists on the left as well as the right . . .” [and] has animated a surprisingly diverse swath of political interests that includes mainstream civil liberties groups, Republican and Democratic lawmakers, conservative research groups, liberal activists and right-wing conspiracy theorists.²⁵

The same tactic is used to describe participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement as a “dizzying assembly of libertarians and anarchists, Christian fundamentalists and Marxists, conspiracy theorists and individuals who appear mostly to be drawn by the daily camaraderie of camp life.”²⁶ This tacitly acknowledges broad support for Occupy, apparently including people who like to go camping, but the participation of conspiracy theorists discredits the movement. In another characteristic article, Occupy “melded a variety of causes . . . , invoking socialism, police violence and Sept. 11 conspiracy theories, in addition to immigrant rights.”²⁷ Here, the “Sept. 11 conspiracy theories” and “socialism” serve to discredit one another, and—given the weight of that—this becomes an attempt to bring perfectly mainstream concerns with police violence and immigrant rights into question.

The phrase, then, impugns the motives and value of anyone so labeled. We should next ask if there are patterns to who is so labeled and who is not. In the mainstream press, already marginalized groups, ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples are often portrayed as a reified, undifferentiated group especially susceptible to the lure of the *conspiracy theory*.

Paranoia in the Ghetto

In August 1996, a series of articles by the late Gary Webb in *The San Jose Mercury-News* tied U.S.-supported troops seeking to topple the Nicaraguan Sandinista government in the 1980s to the crack cocaine distribution network in Los Angeles.²⁸ Webb’s reporting led to outrage among members of black communities (as well as of course many others). The CIA was compelled to conduct an internal investigation of its connections to drug traffickers, ultimately acknowledging that, yes, the fundamentals of these “conspiracy theories” were true:

. . . a senior member of [the] Sandino Revolutionary Front (FRS) agreed in late 1984 with [convicted drug trafficker Jorge] Morales that FRS pilots would aid in transporting narcotics in exchange for financial assistance . . .

Morales agreed to provide financial support to the FRS, in addition to aircraft and training for FRS pilots. After undergoing flight training, the FRS pilots were to continue to work for the FRS, but would also fly narcotics shipments from South America to sites in Costa Rica and Nicaragua for later transport to the United States.²⁹

More startling, perhaps, was the admission that these weren't simply "loose cannons" at the CIA. Although some secrets were kept from their superiors:

Allegations and information indicating drug trafficking by 25 Contra-related individuals was shared in a variety of ways with . . . Executive branch agencies. . . . CIA did inform the intelligence oversight committees in a timely manner of the 1984 allegations . . .³⁰

And President Reagan issued an Executive Order making CIA complicity in drug trafficking legal:

From August 15, 1979 to March 2, 1982, Attorney General Guidelines . . . required CIA to report to DoJ [Department of Justice] possible violations of "any" federal laws – thereby including narcotics laws – by persons who were employed by, assigned to, or acting for CIA. From March 2, 1982 [pursuant Executive order 12333] . . . , because of a change in the definition of "employee," agents, assets and independent contractors were moved to the non-employee category and thereby subject to the list of reportable offenses that did *not* include narcotics violations. . . . A February 8, 1985 internal DoJ memorandum stated explicitly that there was no requirement that CIA report potential narcotics violations.³¹

In sum, an order from the White House at the height of U.S. support of the Contras explicitly dropped the requirement that CIA report drug offenses committed by their paid associates. Subsequently, some members of the CIA were not only ignoring crimes but actively conspiring with drug traffickers. At least some of those drugs, possibly most, were destined for the United States (including the "inner cities").

But back in 1996, claims that the CIA was somehow involved in the cocaine trade were met with derision that singled out African Americans:

The *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* all ran lengthy stories . . . suggesting that the public – and particularly the African-American community – was unduly suspicious of government, if not downright gullible.³²

Julian Beltrame reported that the charges against the CIA “[have] a whiff of a preposterous conspiracy theory . . . , [advanced, according to critics,] by American black leaders eager . . . to find a scapegoat for the crack tragedy.”³³ One such critic was especially dismissive:

So far, however, the CIA-L.A.-crack story is just another dubious chapter in the evolving myth of racial victimization, drawing force and credibility from the all too real history of racial mischief and oppression in America. This particular conspiracy theory implies that, but for foul plots hatched at CIA headquarters and elsewhere, possibly even the Reagan White House itself, the social pathologies so often associated with inner-city life would vanish.³⁴

In these cases, the charges against the CIA (especially as laid out by Webb) are conflated with the more dubious claims (which few were making, but apparently “implying”) that the CIA was solely responsible for the crack epidemic and that it was a deliberate plan to destroy black communities.

Another trend emerged, somewhat surprisingly, that—despite the collective dismissal of the concerns of African Americans—many were quick to put their alleged susceptibility to conspiracy theories in historical context.³⁵ As in the above passage—recognizing, while minimizing, the reality of “racial mischief”—there is a sense of patronizing forgiveness that conceded this reality. Donna Britt, an African-American journalist, was more specific on this “racial mischief,” but much the same point is made: “What feels true to blacks has fueled numerous conspiracy theories. Some, such as the infamous Tuskegee Experiment, are true.”³⁶ Despite the history and the contemporary inequities, the reason for conspiracy theories among blacks isn’t grounded in these facts, but derives only from what “*feels true*” to them.

Under the dismissive title “Though Evidence is Thin, Tale of CIA and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own,” Tim Golden is one of the few to allow the public a voice:

“The established press ignored the story until they found out that black folks weren’t going to just let this one be swept under the rug,” said Don Middleton, 33, a jazz musician in Washington who read the series on the Internet. “The white press is pointing fingers at the black community, saying we’re paranoid and quick to see conspiracy at every turn of the corner. Where have they been for the last 30 years? Can I just mention the Tuskegee syphilis study, Cointelpro, Watergate, Iran-Contra. Hello, America?”³⁷

At all turns throughout this episode, African Americans were often portrayed as prone to a “conspiracy theory” that has, at least in general terms, been confirmed by the CIA itself. With Tuskegee, it is now part of the historical record. Despite

recognition that the history of race in America might be a factor in black peoples' "gullibility," there is never the suggestion that their claims be given credence as a result. It is only part of the "evolving myth of racial victimization."³⁸

Conspiracy Theories in the Muslim World

Coverage of Muslim voices in the mainstream press exhibits a similar pattern. Especially since the attacks of 9/11, Muslims have been vilified as a group and Islam painted as a uniquely and uniformly violent worldview. Islamophobia has led to the reification of a diverse religion with a diverse sets of adherents, and people in nations with Muslim majorities have been characterized as "rife" with unwarranted suspicion, especially, for some reason, of the motives of the West. Given this conflation of nations and ethnic groups, the attitudes of the "Arab Street"—whether Arab or not, and what in the "civilized world" would be characterized as "public opinion"—are often portrayed as grounded not in the facts of U.S. foreign policy but in unwarranted "conspiracy theory." Moreover, unlike the "conspiracy theories" among the black community being treated condescendingly as unfortunate but understandable given the long history of white supremacy, Muslims' attitudes are not put in the historical context of European colonialism and the ongoing War on Terror.

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman sums up this reification of Islamic nations well: "The more these societies become monocultures, the less they spark new ideas and the more susceptible they are to diseased conspiracy theories and extreme ideologies."³⁹ Friedman's "Arab/Muslim world," "susceptible to diseased conspiracy theories," attributes conspiratorial thinking to a conflation of diverse peoples. In numerous articles on the nations and peoples that comprise the "Muslim world," this vocabulary of motive serves to discredit the very real concerns of entire populations.

As the first front in the "War on Terror," despite Afghanistan and Pakistan's ethnically diverse populations, the concerns of people in the "Af/Pak Theater" must be dismissed regularly:

A tribal elder in Balkh Province, in the remote north, said the insurgency had disrupted life for farmers and herders, and he repeated one of a growing number of conspiracy theories about the Americans' intentions.⁴⁰

This is no less true of those who support U.S. intervention, as "even among pro-government Afghans, conspiracy theories abound."⁴¹ However, perhaps because the machinations and the chaos in the country are hard to paper over, attributions of conspiracy to Afghans were relatively rare in the *New York Times* articles examined.

Not so with articles on Pakistan, a frequent target of the accusation. In Pakistan, “where conspiracy theories abound,”⁴² “run rampant,”⁴³ “run rife,”⁴⁴ and are a “national sport,”⁴⁵ “conspiracy theories” are a part of their culture:

[The] report was “larded with strange conspiracies,” [he] said, adding that it was indicative of a broader culture of conspiracy theories. . . . “It’s so untethered from rational discourse.”⁴⁶

The reasons why Pakistanis are so vulnerable to irrational conspiracy theories is not always clear, but Sabrina Tavernise proffers an explanation—it is the result of a collective psychological deficiency:

Conspiracy theories are pervasive in Pakistan, and [she] offered an explanation. They are a projection, she said – a defense mechanism that protects one’s psyche from something too difficult to accept. “It’s not me, it’s you,” she said. “It’s a denial of personal responsibility. . . .” (Tavernise, 2009b, p. 1). They turn to conspiracy theories to explain a reality that is otherwise too awful to face.⁴⁷

Although he too emphasizes that “conspiracy theories” are part of the national character, Salman Masood, in a report on the son of a Chief Justice in Pakistan who had admitted to accepting bribes, has to dismiss his own reporting by blaming his profession:

In a country where conspiracy theories seem to gain steam the more baroque they get, the case has riveted and confused much of the public, in part because the proceedings are based on news media speculation rather than any official complaint.⁴⁸

(Unlike Pakistanis, we are fortunate indeed to enjoy a media system that avoids “speculation.”) Also, still within the context of Pakistanis’ inexplicable fascination with “conspiracy theories,” and without saying it outright, there is sometimes a faint recognition that there just might be some basis to Pakistanis’ concerns:

To them, the affair sheds new light on a murky practice that they say should never take place: the recruitment of aid workers as intelligence operatives in a sensitive country like Pakistan, already awash in conspiracy theories about Western meddling.⁴⁹

Still, for the most part, peoples’ concerns are exaggerated, unfair, and overwrought: Despite that the United States has explicitly targeted infrastructure, “when the water stops running from the tap, people blame America.”⁵⁰

As the ultimate neocon project in the “War on Terror,” Iraqis of all ethnic groups are frequently tarred with this broad brush. Iraq is “a country rife with conspiracy theories,”⁵¹ they “are the currency of daily life,⁵² and are “not uncommon on the streets of Iraq.”⁵³ Indeed, Iraqis have “the conspiracy mindset.”⁵⁴ This, apparently, makes it hard to focus: “As often happens these days in conversations with ordinary Iraqis, [he] first offered a reasonable explanation . . . , and then plunged into conspiracy theory.”⁵⁵ As is typical when explaining the “conspiracy theory,” Michael Schmidt psychologizes the problem:

For some this has become too much, causing them to fall back into familiar ways of coping: concocting conspiracy theories, lashing out violently and stealing from their neighbors.⁵⁶

Far from reasonable in the end, all that conspiracy theorizing (and violent thievery) is simply a coping mechanism.

Across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, no Muslim nation appears untouched. Bangladesh, “where conspiracy theories are a national sport,”⁵⁷ “is rife with conspiracy theories [even] under normal circumstances.”⁵⁸ In Africa, “far-fetched conspiracy theories . . . are now commonly heard in Egypt,”⁵⁹ where “they have a particular hold . . . , sowing confusion in order to avoid accountability.”⁶⁰ To the north:

[Turkish President Recep Erdoğan] “has conjured a dark conspiracy of secular subversives, bankers and Western media, but that is vintage Erdoğan, and vintage Turkey – a country of intrigues that exemplifies the old line: even paranoids have enemies.”⁶¹

And several years before it became the target of the U.S.-backed Saudi assault, Yemen, perhaps presciently, was already a “land of conspiracy theories.”⁶²

Deflecting Critiques of Power

Conspiracy theorist is used to dismiss, denigrate, and to deflect critiques of power. It presents a “type” of argument as inherently false and absurd, illogical, and unreasonable, motivated by a delusional, angry and immoral mind—that of the “conspiracy theorist.” They are the claims of those unworthy of participation in political debate. Then, the application of this term to two groups, African Americans and people in the Muslim-majority nations of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia was examined. A consistent pattern in the application of the label is its use to cordon off the often reasonable belief of populations that they have been subjected to and suffer from the domination of powerful groups. The origins of this use can be found in the chapter in this volume by Andrew McKenzie-McHargh.

To be sure, not only African Americans and Muslims have been tarred as “conspiracy theorists.” They are indeed everywhere. They are “common in Russia,”⁶³ and of course “Bulgarians have a taste for conspiracy theories.”⁶⁴ Not only is there “an Italian tendency to look for conspiracy theories,”⁶⁵ but, in “a country where [they] are often given more credence than news reports . . . , conspiracy theories . . . [come] naturally to Mexicans.”⁶⁶ Even in “the gay community, conspiracy theories initially abounded” before they apparently came to their senses.⁶⁷

It seems that everywhere one turns, marginalized groups share a concern with the abuse of power. That elites and their media would prefer to preempt these conversations should come as no surprise. This is not to suggest that memos from the executive offices of FOX News dictate media spin—the exercise of power is of course more complex. While media power is not, of course, the result of an overarching conspiracy to mask state power, in many ways it might as well be.

Notes

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