

Conspiracy Theories

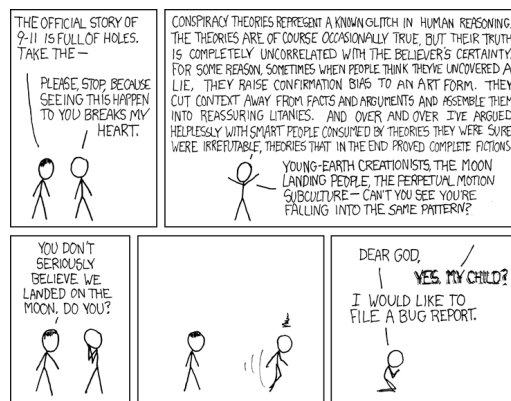
02 May 2023 16:51

The Mother of All Conspiracy Theories, at least in the West, goes something like this: There is an ubiquitous secret society in our midst, alien to our religion, which aims to seize control of the world, or at least the only part of it which counts, i.e. ours. They are everywhere; they are ruthless and powerful (often, supernaturally powerful); they are sexually corrupt (often, incestuous); they preform the very worst of crimes, perhaps as rituals (often, infanticide, cannibalism and religious desecration). This is the burden of [Norman Cohn](#)'s superb *Europe's Inner Demons*, and I think Cohn is absolutely correct. The oldest versions of this story he could find were in Livy (where the Romans applied it to the Bacchantes). It was later applied by the pagans to the Christians, by the Christians to the Jews and all manner of heretics, [then by Christians to \(non-existent\) witches](#); and at that point Cohn leaves off. Since then of course Jews and heretics have continued to be fashionable, but it has also been applied to Catholics, [philosophes](#), Freemasons, [Communists](#), homosexuals, radicals, aristocrats, etc., etc. It is still powerful and still with us. Read [alt.conspiracy](#) or [alt.illuminati](#) or [alt.usenet.kooks](#) --- to say nothing of the tons of apocalyptic and conspiratorial tracts issuing from the presses each year --- and this will become obvious. [Look up the tactics the Church of Scientology uses to smear its opponents](#); listen to a televangelist for a while. --- Nor is it confined to the soft, dark underbelly of thought (confined there? whatever *isn't* there is confined!). Michael Crichton, for instance, uses it in his xenophobic novel [Rising Sun](#); it is the substance of the "satanic ritual abuse" myth promulgated by respected psychotherapists, on the basis of conditions they create in their patients; Republican attacks on "counter-cultural McGoverniks," the "[cultural elite](#)," the "media elite," etc. are a (for the moment, mild) version. It is now as it has always been the mainstay of demagogues, and for some reason it seems Americans are particularly vulnerable to it.

One is tempted to say that conspiracies are the characteristic lunacy of the Right, as [millennia](#) are of the Left; but no doubt there are plenty of counter-examples.

Questions: Why are we fascinated by *this* kind of conspiracy? What do conspiracies from other cultures look like?

The last word on this subject deserves to go to Randall "xkcd" Munroe (click for the full-size version):



See also: [Cults, Enthusiasts](#); [Historical Materialism](#); [Millenarianism](#); [Narrative Communities](#); [Possession, Multiple Personality Disorder](#); [Psychoceramics](#); the [Right](#); the "[Satanic Panic](#)" of the 1980s and [Recovered Memories](#); [UFOs](#); the [Witch Craze](#)

Recommended, *about* conspiracy theories, big picture:

- Michael Barkun, [A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America](#)
- [Norman Cohn](#), *Europe's Inner Demons*
- [Kieran Healy](#), [Take Me to Your Leader](#)
- Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* [[Title essay](#) online]
- [George Johnson](#), [Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics](#)
- Donna Kossy, *Kooks* [stranger than fiction; cf. the [Kooks Museum](#)]
- Anna Merlan, [Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power](#)

Recommended, *about*, close-ups:

- [Phil Agre](#), [The Return of Antimasonry in American Political Life](#) [This was a great 1998 essay, which I sadly can no longer find online; I'm leaving this link

- here as a prod to myself to look harder at some point in the future]
- Michael Barkun, [Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement](#)
 - Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*
 - James Corcoran, *Bitter Harves: The Birth of Paramilitary Terrorism in the Heartland* [1990, i.e., before Oklahoma City. Growth of conspiracy theory/apocalyptic/ racist Christian movements in the American heartland. Conforms astonishingly well to Cohn's schema]
 - Umberto [Eco](#)
 - *Foucault's Pendulum* [Fiction, with serious arguments]
 - *Travels in Hyperreality* [Essays]
 - Barbara Ehrenreich, *Kipper's Game* [fiction]
 - Seth J. Hill and Margaret E. Roberts, "Acquiescence Bias Inflates Estimates of Conspiratorial Beliefs and Political Misperceptions" [[PDF preprint via Prof. Roberts](#)]
 - Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism* [No that title is *not* overblown; LaRouche is not just an unusually well-read paranoid, he's actually quite disgusting when you take a good look. I did, after a LaRouchie tried to recruit me on the basis of [one of my notebooks](#).]
 - Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* [[Free full text](#), Reprinted in Lowenthal's collection *False Prophets: Studies on Authoritarianism*]
 - Ofshe and Watters, *Making Monsters* [See under [Memory](#)]
 - Elaine Showalter, [Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media](#)
 - H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*
 - Robert Wilonsky, "The Truth Is Way Out There," *Dallas Observer* 6 July 2000 [Profile of serial conspiracy theorist Jim Marrs. [Online](#) via Kenneth Rahn]

Recommended, *examples* of conspiracy theories:

- [Art Bell](#) [Demonstrating just how *dumb* conspiracy theories can be and still propagate mightily]
- [Jack Chick Publications](#)
- *Focus on the Family*, August 1995 is an interesting variant of the myth, where the Conspiracy is split into two allied parts, one of which (American "gender feminists") is sexually decadent and plotting to take over God's Own Country, the other (the Chinese Communists) cannibalistic. Yes, that's right, the Chicom are cannibals: of aborted fetuses, what else? It was in a magazine, so it must be true. This particular detail, fetus-eating, also features in some incarnations of the Satanic Ritual Abuse myth, and goes back, as readers of Cohn's [The Pursuit of the Millennium](#) may recall, to the prophecy known as *Pseudo-Methodius* in the seventh or eighth century AD. Its application to the Chinese is specially ironic, as there have been widely-believed rumors in China that European missionaries established orphanages to get children to eat. The author of this altogether unpleasant piece is James C. Dobson, Ph.D. a "licensed psychologist" (surprise, surprise!), "author of 13 best-selling books on marriage and the family, including *The New Dare to Discipline*, *The Strong-Willed Child*, *Love Must Be Tough*, *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*, *Children at Risk* and *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. [These are mainly notable for advocating corporal punishment as the most effective means of breaking the wills of children; see Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*.].... Dr. Dobson was appointed by President Reagan to the National Advisory Commission for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He also served on the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography and on the Attorney General's Advisory board on Missing and Exploited Children."
- Addendum (1)*: The Chinese-eat-aborted-babies myth is spreading. Vide this page ["One Man's Ministry"](#), part of a series of pages about a gargantuan roadside [Cross](#) in (where else?) Texas. The author wrote for permission to link to one of my pages (presumably not this one!), which of course I granted, but he doesn't seem to have gotten around to it yet. [14 May 1996] [Those links are now dead and gone, alas: 18 February 2000]
- Addendum (2)*: The original web-site with the on-line article is down, and it's not available from the official [Focus on the Family](#) web-site (understandably), which in fact seems mostly devoted to flogging Dr. Dobson's inspirational tapes. [4 November 1998]
- Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer [or Kraemer or Institoris], *Malleus Maleficarum* ["The Hammer of Witches"; a 15th century witch-hunter's manual. The English translation by Montague Summers (reprinted by Dover Books) is particularly appalling, in as much as Father Summers believed, and argued at length, that Sprenger and Kramer were both correct and justified.]

I wish I could recommend,

- Shalizi et alii, [The Story So Far](#), but as a conspiracy theory it's a failure (we were far too nice)

To read:

- James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism*

- Dolores Albarracín, Julia Albarracín, Man-pui Sally Chan and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, [Creating Conspiracy Beliefs: How Our Thoughts Are Shaped](#)
 - Gil Alexander-Moegerle, *James Dobson's War on America*
 - Michael Barkun, "Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge", [Diogenes 62 \(2016\): 114--120](#)
 - Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*
 - Rob Brotherton, [Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories](#)
 - David Coady (ed.), "Conspiracy Theories" special issue ([vol. 4, no. 2, June 2007](#)) of *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*
 - Epstein and Forste, *Radical Right* [Contemporary study of the John Birch Society]
 - *Extremism in America*
 - David Frankfurter, [Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History](#)
 - Dax Gerts, Courtney D. Shelley, Nidhi Parikh, Travis Pitts, Chrysm Watson Ross, Geoffrey Fairchild, Nidia Yadria Vaquera Chavez, Ashlynn R. Daughton, " "Thought I'd Share First" and Other Conspiracy Theory Tweets from the COVID-19 Infodemic: Exploratory Study", [arxiv:2012.07729](#)
 - Ted Goertzel, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* (1994) [[on-line version as MS Word file](#) {speaking of conspiracies...}]
 - Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*
 - Megan Goodwin, [Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions](#)
 - [Brian L. Keeley](#)
 - "Of Conspiracy Theories", *Journal of Philosophy* **96**: 109--126 [Described by the author as "[a]n attempt to do for conspiracy theories what [Hume](#) did to miracles." Preprints in [HTML](#), [PDF](#)]
 - "Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition! Further thoughts on conspiracy theories", *Journal of Social Philosophy* **34**: 104--110 [[PDF preprint](#)]
 - Thomas Milan Konda, [Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America](#)
 - Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook and Elisabeth Lloyd, "The 'Alice in Wonderland' mechanics of the rejection of (climate) science: simulating coherence by conspiracism", *Synthese* **195** (2018): 175--196 [CR](#)
 - Timothy Melley, [Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America](#)
 - Gustavus Myers, *History of Bigotry in the United States*
 - William G. Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, 1530--1640*
 - C. Thi Nguyen, "Playfulness Versus Epistemic Traps", in [Mark Alfano, Colin Klein and Jeroen de Ridder \(eds.\), Social Virtue Epistemology \(2022\)](#)
 - Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*
 - Myrto Pantazi, Kostas Papaioannou, Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Power to the People: The Hidden Link Between Support for Direct Democracy and Belief in Conspiracy Theories", *Political Psychology* **43** (2022): 529--548 [CR](#)
 - Kostas Papaioannou, Myrto Pantazi, Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Is democracy under threat? Why belief in conspiracy theories predicts autocratic attitudes", [European Journal of Social Psychology forthcoming \(2023\)](#) [CR](#)
 - Joseph Roisman, [The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens](#)
 - E. Keith Smith, Adam Mayer and Julia Bognar, "Political Conspiratorial Beliefs are Likely Over-Estimated and Transitory", [2022](#) [CR](#)
 - Patricia A. Turner, [I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture](#)
 - Joseph E. Uscinski
 - [Conspiracy Theories: A Primer](#)
 - (ed.), [Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them](#)
 - and Joseph M. Parent, [American Conspiracy Theories](#) [This promises to contain some fascinating empirical data about the content and frequency of conspiracy theories in the US over more than a century, based on letters to newspapers (!)]
 - Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, Hugo Drochon, Kamal Premaratne, Manohar Murthi, "Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?", [PLoS One 17 \(2022\): e0270429](#) [CR](#)
 - Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*
 - Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), [Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order](#) (2003)
 - Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories", [Social Psychological and Personality Science](#) **3** (2012): 767--773 [My initial professional impulse, as a statistician reading the abstract, is to want to look very carefully at the raw data to make sure this isn't being driven by a few people who are genuinely nuts and/or just didn't pay attention to the survey prompts]
 - Theodore Ziolkowski, [Lure of the Arcane: The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy](#)
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