

WILT THOU CONCEAL THIS DARK CONSPIRACY?

By

Charles Pigden

Dr Ward of Knox College obviously considers himself a sophisticated fellow. You can tell by the humorous yet statesmanlike tone of his article 'Psst ... wanna hear a conspiracy theory?' (ODT 29/6/06). 'It is important', he thinks 'in dialoguing with conspiracy thinking, not just to refute it ... but to ask why is it that people are believing this theory?' This apparently 'would create a much healthier dialogue than the shouting past each other that often seems to take place.' In other words, in addition to refuting conspiracy theories (which he takes for granted can usually be done) we should offer diagnoses of the ideological obsessions underlying the conspiracy theorists' errors. I'm not so sure that this procedure would really promote the healthy dialogue that he desires (since conspiracy theorists might find it a little patronizing). But what is really wrong with his article is not his patronizing proposal but the bland assumption on which his article is based that *of course* conspiracy theories are false or foolish simply because they *are* conspiracy theories. So far from being the sophisticated view this is one of the most dangerous and idiotic ideas to disgrace our political culture. Strong words, these, so I had better back them up. Let's start with 'idiotic'. A conspiracy is a secret plan to influence events by partly covert action. Conspiracies are not necessarily wrong - there can be conspiracies in the public interest as when Stauffenberg and his associates conspired to murder Hitler or when leading civil servants conspired to leak information to Winston Churchill (then on the back benches) about the looming Nazi threat - but we generally talk of conspiracy when the secret plan in question seems morally questionable, at least to some people. (If nobody disapproved, there would be no need to keep the plan a secret!) A conspiracy *theory* is a theory which endeavours to explain some set of events by postulating a conspiracy, successful or otherwise. (*Failed* conspiracies can often have quite an impact, such as the conspiracy to save the Soviet Union by kidnapping Gorbachev. The ultimate effect - the collapse of Soviet Communism - was the reverse of what the conspirators intended.) A conspiracy *theorist* is someone who subscribes to a conspiracy *theory*. Given these definitions it is *ridiculous* to suppose that conspiracy theories *as such* are (or are likely to be) foolish, faulty or false. For people often conspire and

when they do, the corresponding theories will be correct. On this point (as John Locke might have said) 'I appeal to any who have been but moderately conversant in the history of mankind, and looked abroad beyond the smoke of their own chimneys'. The theory that posited a conspiracy on the part of Nixon and his associates to pervert the course of justice by concealing their complicity in the Watergate burglary was correct. So too was the theory which posited a conspiracy on the part of radical Serbian nationalists to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. And let's not forget the theory which explains the events of 9/11 as due to a conspiracy on the part of al Qaeda operatives to kill large numbers of Americans by hijacking airliners and ramming them into the Twin Towers. It is not irrational to believe these theories - on the contrary it is the mark of an historical illiterate *not* to believe them. Indeed, history is positively choc-a-bloc with well-confirmed conspiracy theories, as is the nightly news. If you want to mount a *coup d'etat*, the current President had better be kept out of the loop, and it is much better if you can secure control of the Presidential Palace *before* anyone raises the alarm. A *coup d'etat* therefore, is bound to be a conspiratorial business. Hence, anyone who believes that there are such things as *coups* is *ipso facto* a conspiracy theorist (though some such as Dr Ward don't seem to be aware of the fact). Though some assassinations can be put down to 'lone gunmen' - or in the past lone dagger-men - others, such as the great big bomb which blew up ex-premier Rafik Hariri of the Lebanon, are the products of conspiracy. This being so, it is absurd - indeed *idiotic* - to suppose that conspiracy theories *as such* are automatically suspect. I am not, of course, claiming that conspiracy theories are automatically *right*. Some are true, some are false, some are sensible, and some are barking mad. (For example, the thesis that for 2000 years there has been a secret society devoted to suppressing knowledge of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalen.) But when conspiracy theories are false or silly they are not false or silly *because* they are conspiracy theories or because they are manifestations of an intellectual syndrome known as 'conspiracy thinking'. They are false or silly because the *specific* conspiracies that they hypothesize are non-existent, far-fetched or improbable. And there are plenty of conspiracies that are none of these things.

All this is very obvious. So it is tempting to suppose that when people like Dr Ward or the journalist Christopher Hitchens pooh-pooh conspiracy

theories as the 'exhaust fumes' of democracy they mean something less silly than what they appear to be saying. Perhaps for them a conspiracy theory is not simply a theory which posits a conspiracy but a theory which posits a conspiracy of some supposedly improbable kind. Thus Ward: 'Conspiracy thinking casts doubt on the truth of ... official versions [of events] - and questions who or what to blame for complex situations. ... My own definition of a conspiracy theory is: "The official story is suspect ... there are other factors, sometimes secret but hidden ... at play." There are gaps in the official story. The theory seeks to fill in the gaps.' This is a sloppy piece of writing since his 'definition' isn't a definition at all - rather it is an attempt to dramatize the kind of thinking that he takes to be typical among conspiracy theorists. However this gives us some inkling of what he means when he talks about conspiracy theories and why he thinks that conspiracy theories as such are intellectually suspect. For him conspiracy theories are not simply theories which endeavor to explain events by positing conspiracies - they are theories which endeavor to explain events by positing conspiracies *on the part of public officials* of some kind. If this is what he means, then you can see why the theory that explains the assassination of Franz Ferdinand as due to a conspiracy of Serbian nationalists does not count as a conspiracy theory in his book, since Princip and his associates were not public officials. We can also see why the theory which explains the events of 9/11 as due to a conspiracy on the part of al Qaeda does not count as a conspiracy theory either since most al Qaeda operatives were not in the public employ. But what about the theory that justified the Iraq war - that Saddam Hussein had successfully conspired to acquire and conceal weapons of mass destruction, including perhaps the wherewithal for a nuclear weapons program? Does this count as a conspiracy theory for Ward? After all, the chief of the alleged conspiracy - Saddam Hussein - was a public official, since he was President of Iraq, and the theory was in conflict with the official view of the Iraqi government, which stoutly maintained that it had no WMDs! But suppose we add the qualifier that a conspiracy theory is only a conspiracy theory in Ward's sense if it posits a conspiracy involving *Western* public officials. Then you can consistently suppose that conspiracy theories (in this sense) are intellectually suspect whilst subscribing to the theory that Saddam had conspired to acquire weapons of mass destruction. This is precisely the stance of Tony

Blair, who went to war on the pretext of the WMD theory even though he considers it wrong to suppose that the Iraq war has anything to do with oil or that President Bush considered bombing the al Jazeera because these claims are (you've guessed it) 'conspiracy theories'.

Thus if we give the phrase 'conspiracy theory' a sufficiently skewed definition we can restore Tony Blair to consistency. But even if we define 'conspiracy theory' in this oddly restricted way, it is still idiotic to suppose that conspiracy theories *as such* are automatically faulty or foolish. For there are plenty of conspiracy theories (in this sense) that have proved to be correct. I've mentioned Watergate already, but if you want more I can cite Mr 'exhaust fumes of democracy' himself, the journalist Christopher Hitchens. In his book *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, he makes a pretty good case for the following conspiracy theories: 1) that Kissinger (as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State) conspired to perpetrate a secret and illegal bombing campaign in Indochina that led to mass killing of civilians; 2) that Kissinger colluded in mass murder and assassination in Bangladesh 3) that Kissinger colluded in a plot to overthrow and perhaps murder Archbishop Makarios, then President of Cyprus; 4) that Kissinger colluded in the Indonesian invasion of East Timor; and 5) that he colluded in the *coup* against Salvador Allende the democratically elected President Chile which culminated in Allende's death. If you dismiss all this as the ravings of an ex-Trotskyite, I recommend the memoirs of Robert McNamara (US Secretary of Defense) in which he discusses a Whitehouse cable of 24/8/63 to the US ambassador to South Vietnam, authorizing him in effect, to start organizing a conspiracy against Diem, the President of South Vietnam (a conspiracy which resulted in his overthrow and murder).

I have said enough, I think to justify *one* of my harsh words - 'idiotic'. There is no way of understanding Dr Ward's bland presupposition which makes it a sensible thing to think. What about the other word - 'dangerous'? The idea that conspiracy theories are automatically suspect is *dangerous* because it allows conspirators to cover their lies, evasions and (in some cases) self-deceptions with a spurious veneer of methodological sophistication. Did Bush seriously discuss with Blair the possibility of bombing al-Jazeera? He can't have done, for the idea that he did would be a conspiracy theory! Did Stalin engineer the murder of Kirov with a view to instituting a reign of

terror? Don't be so naïve - that's a conspiracy theory! Has the US government been kidnapping terror suspects and sending them off to foreign parts where they can be interrogated without regard to the tiresome formalities of Human Rights Law? Come, come - that's enough conspiracy thinking for one day! The price of liberty is eternal vigilance - that is vigilance on the part of the citizens against the abuse of power by governments. And the trouble with the idea that conspiracy theories are automatically suspect is that it tends to lull us to sleep.

*Dr Charles Pigden teaches philosophy at the University of Otago. He is the author of two papers 'Popper Revisited' and 'Complots of Mischief' in David Coady ed. **Conspiracy Theories: the Philosophical Debate**, in which he argues for the claims of this article at much greater length and in blank verse.*