

IN DEFENSE OF LIBERAL CONSPIRATORS

~ DEEP DIVE HISTORY ~ NEAR & FAR ~ ASTRA TAYLOR

"It's as natural as breathing" is a cliché because, when all is going well, nothing else is more effortless than inhaling and exhaling, something we do approximately twenty thousand times a day. Typically, most of us don't think much about it. We breathe as we sleep, breathe as we eat, breathe as we move, and breathe as we talk. But that changed in 2020. We worried about our lungs and gasped for air. A novel illness sickened millions and tanked the global economy, thousands ingested tear gas protesting police violence, and cities were smothered by plumes of dark, noxious smoke from nearby forest fires.

During the first tense few weeks of the **Covid-19** shutdown, we thought we could stop the spread of the disease by washing our hands. Our hands were something we could control. We could keep them in our pockets, wear latex gloves, have sanitizer at the ready, and scrub-off the pathogen with soap and hot water. We didn't have all the facts. The coronavirus, as U.S. authorities knew by early February, is airborne, transmitted through invisible particles and droplets emitted and ingested during the most automatic of physical acts. The pandemic has revealed *"that our bodies function more like sponges than fortresses,"* my sister, the disability rights activist and scholar **Sunaura Taylor**, observed. *"In a variety of visualizations, we see our bodies extending beyond their usual bounds: graphics of our coughs, sneezes, and even breath show how far beyond our own skin our bodies reach; the six-foot rule of social distancing a daily acknowledgment that our bodies not only leak and ooze, but that they absorb the conditions of others."* Epidemiology and physics colluded to prove that even at a seemingly safe distance, we touch by virtue of breathing the same air.

In the worst cases, Covid-19 causes acute respiratory distress. Experts describe succumbing to the disease as akin to drowning. Early in the outbreak I read a piece by a doctor attempting to educate readers about how our lungs operate and what contracting the illness might entail. A healthy lung is so soft, she wrote, it *"has almost no substance";* touching it feels like *"reaching into a bowl of whipped cream."* Covid changes that, filling the twin organs with a yellow goo that blocks the free flow of oxygen: *"The lung texture changes, beginning to feel more like a marshmallow than whipped cream."* To be soft and permeable like a sponge is to be healthy. To be rigid and closed off, fortresslike, spells doom. This is true, it turns out, not just for our lungs but also for our very selves.

When we breathe, we pull air into our windpipe, or trachea. That pipe then splits into our lungs' two main airways, called bronchi, which then branch off into smaller and smaller passageways, leading to tiny twig-like tubes called bronchioles that culminate in clusters of microscopic sacs called alveoli. In medical diagrams these passageways resemble the branches of an upside-down tree, as though every human being contains a piece of an inverted forest inside their chest. It's a fitting image, because if it weren't for trees, we wouldn't be able to breathe. By photosynthesizing, plants generate carbohydrates and oxygen in equal measure, nourishing our bellies and filling our lungs. Without them we'd starve, but not before we choked on lethal levels of carbon dioxide. In this sense, the thousands of fires that raged across North America in 2020, burning more than eight million acres, charred the lungs of the earth.

In those months, some communities gagged on smoke, others on pepper spray. On May 25, forty-six-year-old **George Floyd** was asphyxiated by **Derek Chauvin**, a Minneapolis police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds with an expression of untouchable, detached superiority. Floyd's alleged transgression was using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. The assault was caught on video, and perhaps because the pandemic had slowed things down, people paid attention. Floyd's murder galvanized the biggest protest movement in U.S. history, attracting up to twenty-six million participants by midsummer. Police and federal agents responded with unrelenting force, blinding over a dozen eyes with rubber bullets and burning thousands of people's lungs with chemical weapons, including smoke grenades. In Portland, Oregon, residents used leaf blowers for self-defense, redirecting fumes away from innocent crowds and back toward the cops. Floyd's last words echoed Eric Garner, who uttered a phrase that would become a common chant at Black Lives Matter protests as he was killed by police in New York City in 2014: **"I can't breathe."** In streets full of tear gas, demonstrators couldn't breathe either.

The right wing, predictably, responded to these developments with aggressive denial. Millions of people already devoted to conspiracy theories merely had to add a few new twists to pre-existing narratives to bring them up to date. The coronavirus, like global warming, was a hoax, an elaborate ruse by an elite and evil cabal to control the populace—not a pandemic but a **"plandemic."** Likewise, the fires in California and Washington were not connected to shifting weather patterns caused by greenhouse gas emissions, but the result of arson, violent acts committed by mythic anarchists and anti-fascists who were never found but who were certainly in cahoots with Black Lives Matter. From his White House perch, Donald Trump amplified falsehoods, uplifted racists, and sowed confusion and doubt. Research showed he was the single largest source of disinformation about Covid-19. While condemning millions to disease and destitution, Trump told his followers they were victims not of a vastly unequal society (helmed by a sociopathic plutocrat no less) but of public health protocols and marginalized groups seeking equal rights; he comforted those afflicted with delusions that a reassertion of white supremacy and a revolt against a spectral "deep state" could cure the crisis. A network of right-wing individuals and foundations funded and fomented discontent, emboldening armed vigilantes who gathered at state capitols demanding a return to business as usual. In Michigan, fourteen men, aggrieved by coronavirus restrictions, were arrested for plotting to

kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Court documents show they also discussed storming the legislature to *"take hostages, execute tyrants, and have it televised."* Instead of being snapped back to their senses by a deadly illness, people retreated further into fantasy and fallacy, in which face masks were part of a far-reaching conspiracy to suffocate patriots and stifle freedom.

According to my dictionary, a conspiracy is **"a plotting of evil, unlawful design; a combination of persons for an evil purpose."** This is the definition that describes the most popular conspiracy theories of our day, which claim to ferret out a demonic sect pulling society's strings, whether they are nefarious globalists, Jewish bankers, a Satanic pedophile ring, a *"shadow government,"* or some dastardly combination thereof. While such misapprehensions are as old as the nation itself—some historians point out that the United States was born of a conspiracy theory, as evidenced by the Declaration of Independence's paranoid litany of Britain's *"abuses and usurpations,"* including unleashing *"merciless Indian savages"* and *"absolute despotism"*—the Trump era was uniquely steeped in them. Trump's rise to power began with the racist lie of **birtherism** (insisting that Barack Obama was not a true U.S. citizen) and ended in the authoritarian insistence that the election was rigged and stolen by "socialist" Democrats, with the help of some disloyal Republican officials (among them Attorney General William Barr). While people on the political left are not immune to it, this kind of **conspiracism** is more endemic among and useful to the right wing.

If we go further back, however, we'll find the word conspiracy has a different, more profound meaning that might help us comprehend our present predicament. It comes from the Latin **conspirationem**, *"agreement, union, unanimity,"* and *conspirare*, *"to be in agreement; to ally"*—or, literally, *"to breathe together."* That is what the more powerful segment of society, the ruling class, have never wanted the rest of us to do—to come together as allies and, god forbid, form unions. Throughout U.S. history, the most influential and destructive conspiracies have emanated not from the fringes but from the country's political and financial centers of power, and their goal has been preventing regular people from banding together to improve their lot. Polls reveal shockingly high levels of isolation and loneliness among the U.S. population, conditions that are known to make people more susceptible to the destructive, paranoid conspiracy theories that abet the right wing. We are all living amid the wreckage of a long, ongoing, and intentional sabotage of progressive collective action: a profit-driven health care system ill-prepared to cope with a pandemic, runaway climate change threatening the future, a bigoted and broken criminal justice system, a misinformation-added (and conspiracy-promoting) corporate media sphere, and an economy in which the majority of people can barely keep their heads above water. Our inability to truly conspire is why so many people are struggling to breathe today.

"The power to define what is and is not a conspiracy is a jealously guarded privilege," Michael Mark Cohen writes in his fascinating book *The Conspiracy of Capital: Law, Violence, and American Popular Radicalism in the Age of Monopoly*. In the early days of the United States, this battle would be fought overwhelmingly in the courts.

The first labor conspiracy case in the United States was the Philadelphia Cordwainers trial of 1805 to 1806, and it remains one of the most significant trials in labor history to this day. *"A group of journeyman shoemakers attempted to combine to demand higher pay and prevent the hiring of replacement workers,"* Cohen explains, and in response they were charged with forming *"a combination and conspiracy to raise wages."* Shoemaking was one of the city's most profitable industries, and it was also the most contentious. A dispute over wages led to a seven-week strike and then a lawsuit, with eight journeymen indicted. A scab testified that the *"workers were foreigners seeking to overthrow the laws of the United States"* (the trope of the outside agitator was already in effect). The prosecution argued that the workers' collusion threatened not only the shoemaking industry but also the entire city's economy. While the workers got off with a small fine, the case set a disturbing precedent. Other courts interpreted the verdict as a ban on labor unions, which meant that organizing efforts were henceforth subject to suppression from both employers and the state. Between 1806 and 1842 there were more than twenty-one labor conspiracy trials involving *"cordwainers, tailors, hatters, spinners, and carpet weavers,"* Cohen reports. Strikers won six of them. But in each and every case, unions were deemed illegal **"combinations"** and **"conspiracies"** and forbidden.

Speaking for countless others, Philadelphia labor leader Stephen Simpson railed against a double standard that tilted the playing field in favor of employers. *"If mechanics combine to raise their wages, the laws punish them as conspirators against the good of society, and the dungeon awaits them as it does the robber,"* he wrote in 1831. *"But the laws have made it a just and meritorious act, that capitalists shall combine to strip the man of labour of his earnings, and reduce him to a dry crust, and a gourd of water."* Robert G. Ingersoll, a famed agnostic and social reformer, would later express the same sentiment in a pithier formulation: *"If the rich meet to reduce wages, that's a conference; if the poor resist the reduction, that's a conspiracy."* The double standard would be etched into law: At the same times workers were under attack, the owning class was provided with a bevy of new rights. A corporation would be redefined as a "legal person" entitled to equal protection. Limited liability companies received state sanction and support while labor unions were deemed illegal.

'LIBERAL CONSPIRATORS' Continued next page



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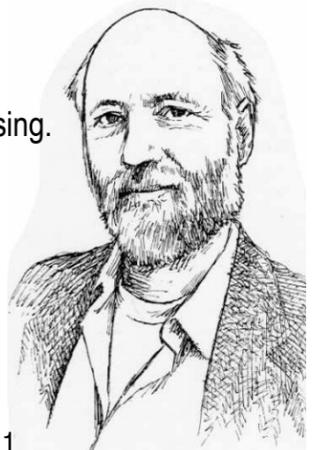
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