

'LIBERAL CONSPIRATORS' - Astra Taylor Continues from page 15

As the age of monopoly wore on, conspiracy charges ramped up. The common law doctrine of criminal conspiracy allowed the captains of industry to regulate working-class organization with incessant litigation, turning courtrooms into centers of class conflict. A vague and broad accusation, the conspiracy doctrine implied guilt by association and was used to suppress dissent, "to ban unions, outlaw strikes, pickets, and boycotts, to criminalize radical ideologies like anarchism and communism," in Cohen's words. The doctrine was considered "the darling of the prosecutor's nursery" for its sweeping application and loose evidentiary rules, which meant it was perfect for suppressing dissent—anyone could be sucked into the ring of conspirators, even those who had never met before. "If there are still any citizens interested in protecting human liberty, let them study the conspiracy laws of the United States," the famed radical lawyer **Clarence Darrow**, implored. "No one's liberty is safe."

Born in 1857, Darrow defended countless workers and organizers from conspiracy charges over his career, inspired, in part, by the famous Haymarket trial, a miscarriage of justice that saw eight anarchists charged with conspiracy and seven sentenced to death for an explosion at a small rally (a pardon would be issued in time to save three of them). In an attempt to mount more successful defenses, Darrow dug into the conspiracy doctrine's history to uncover its basis in English common law, only to discover that its original purpose had been turned on its head. First codified in 1305, the conspiracy doctrine began as a medieval English law designed to prevent malicious persecution. "It was an ancient law that a man who conspired to use the courts to destroy his fellow-men was guilty of treason to the state," Darrow concluded. "He had laid his hand upon the State itself; he had touched the bulwark of human liberty."

The Age of Revolution flipped the script, shifting the doctrine's purpose from the prevention and punishment of private abuse of the jury system to the subversion of efforts to build working-class solidarity. In 1721, English judges ruled in *Rex v. Journeymen Tailors of Cambridge* that workers' efforts to strike to raise wages amounted to an unlawful and criminal conspiracy, setting the stage for the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, which made trade unionism illegal in Britain, though laborers continued to put up fierce resistance. "The aristocracy were interested in repressing the Jacobin 'conspiracies' of the people," Cohen explains, while "the manufacturers were interested in defeating their 'conspiracies to increase wages.'" The Combination Acts did both. A cross section of elites gained power, and labor was forced into the shadows. As a result, the historian E.P. Thompson notes in his study of the English working class, organizing became more furtive, or "conspiratorial" in its modern-day sense. Workers could unite only in secret, ever watchful for employers, magistrates, parsons, and spies who might be their undoing.

Workers fought back, but always from a defensive crouch. In the United States, laborers exploited on the job faced retaliation for demanding better treatment. They could be fired, wounded, or lynched, whether by hired **Pinkerton guards** or volunteer reactionary mobs. World War I inflamed **ethno-nationalist** tensions and put targets on the backs of radicals, with thousands arrested and often deported in the infamous **Palmer Raids**. The wartime Espionage Act strengthened the hand of the state, making it possible to prosecute labor partisans for words alone. The legendary organizer **Eugene Debs** was jailed for declaring that the only war in which he would enlist "was the war of the workers of the world against the exploiters of the world." Voicing that sentiment landed him in prison for sedition, a charge held up by a unanimous Supreme Court decision.

With hindsight, we regard the Haymarket affair, the first wave of the Red Scare, and the Palmer Raids as egregious abuses of state power. But rather than being aberrations, they epitomize a troubling current that has coursed through U.S. history since the colonial days, carried across the Atlantic via British common law all the way to the present day—a disastrous determination to squelch the efforts of working people to become organized. "The most dangerous conspiracy theories, especially rightwing conspiracy theories, do not exclusively populate the extremist margins of American politics and history," Cohen observes. "Rather, the most dangerous conspiracy theories in



American politics emerge from the very center of power, in which white supremacist, anti-communist, and anti-terrorist ideologies, each defined by shifting fears of subversive conspiracies, are promoted and enacted by presidents, business leaders, military men, judges, prosecutors, police, and vigilantes." The most destructive purveyors of conspiracy theories are not average people who anxiously embrace half-truths. Rather, the real threat comes from those who hold official positions of influence and who actively trade in damaging lies to maintain dominance, fully aware that their continued authority depends on the disorientation, distraction, demoralization, and disarray of millions of others. If that sounds conspiratorial, it is. "I think a little conspiratorialism on the left is sometimes healthy. There actually is a cabal of ruling elites that seek to poison and imprison this world in the name of profits," Cohen told me by email. "And those people have names, addresses and regularly meet to plot their crimes against humanity and nature. We have much to gain by naming and fighting them both individually and as a group."

In 1961, sociologist **Daniel Bell** speculated that there is "in the American temper, a feeling that 'somewhere,' 'somebody' is pulling all the complicated strings to which this jumbled world dances." The esteemed historian **Richard Hofstadter** echoed that sentiment, publishing **The Paranoid Style in American Politics** to great acclaim. Over the course of the Trump presidency, countless op-eds, journalistic exposés, academic articles, and books have articulated a similar concern, citing the explosion of conspiracy theories and the elevation of some of the most outlandish ones to the halls of power. The same election that evicted Trump from the White House secured victory for two congressional candidates who publicly supported **QAnon**, a convoluted conspiracy devoted to interpreting message board missives from "Q," a mysterious figure and supposed government insider with knowledge of Trump's plan to vanquish the Devil-worshipping, child-molesting globalists who currently run the world and send them to Guantánamo Bay with the help of John F. Kennedy Jr., who faked his own death in 1999 and has been in hiding ever since. At the end of 2020, **NPR** and **Ipsos** published the results of a poll assessing QAnon's reach. Seventeen percent of respondents said it was "true" that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media," and 37 percent more said they didn't know. Without a doubt, it is alarming when millions of people reject basic reality, even the reality of something as banal as a celebrity's death. Yet attempts to diagnose the problem's source and identify possible cures too often fall short.

The book **A Lot of People Are Saying**, from 2019, epitomizes the genre. Authors **Nancy Rosenblum** and **Russell Muirhead** describe what they call the "new conspiracism," or "conspiracism without theory." In their schema, classic conspiracism's

evidentiary basis (picture dozens of JFK assassination aficionados poring over photographs of the grassy knoll) has been abandoned in favor of pure affect; hypotheses and suppositions gain purchase through repetition, not proof. Digital networks drown internet users in dubious information designed less to persuade than to overwhelm, as social networks circulate and recirculate sensational claims. Those who know how to game algorithms amass enormous followings, and those with the most "engaging" content always win, accuracy be damned.

In 2020, millions of jobs evaporated overnight, but hucksters hit pay dirt. The clickbait economy launched the careers of an astonishing number of "conspiracy entrepreneurs," a handful of whom, like **Alex Jones**, are national figures while the vast majority carve out a specialized niche, perhaps exposing "crisis actors" (the people who purportedly pretend to be victims of mass shootings as part of a larger plot to undermine the Second Amendment) or tracking "chem trails" (mind-controlling vapors allegedly released by planes). Rosenblum and Muirhead quote Stefanie MacWilliams, a twentysomething woman from Belleville, Ontario, who gained notoriety for propagating the myth of "Pizzagate," which held that prominent Democratic political operatives (including Hillary Clinton and John Podesta) ran a pedophile ring housed at a popular pizza parlor in Washington, D.C., called Comet Ping Pong, which inspired a man to travel from North Carolina, enter the premises, and fire a military assault rifle, demanding the release of imaginary sex slaves he believed were being held in a nonexistent basement. Despite the fact that someone could have been killed during the commotion, MacWilliams was unremorseful:

"I really have no regrets and it's honestly really grown our audience."

A Lot of People Are Saying maintains that while conspiracism has long pervaded U.S. politics, something significant has changed in recent years. "Today, conspiracism is not, as we might expect, the last resort of permanent political losers, but the first resort of winners," the authors observe, in a reference to Donald Trump's rule as conspiracist-in-chief and the Republican Party's tendency to paint itself as a victim even as it wields political power. For all the authors' supposed historical acuity, their insistence that conspiracy theories originating from the powerful is a new phenomenon only holds if you selectively interpret and idealize the past. A cursory glance at U.S. history, or a close read of Michael Mark Cohen, shows that the powerful have claimed to be victims since the founding of the nation. The lies peddled by Trump and the Grand Old Party are just the latest iterations of the truth-destroying, state-building ideologies of yore.

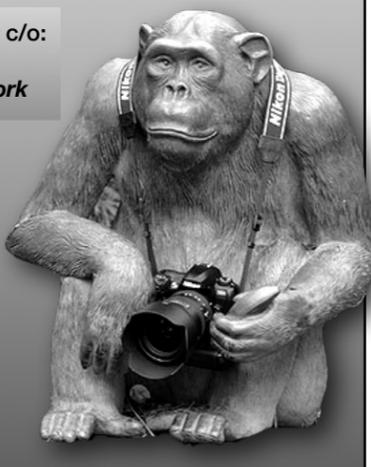
Today we use the term **Red Scare** to indicate an overreaction, but the mania lasted the better part of the twentieth century, peaking twice, first around World War I and then after World War II. During the second surge, the **House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC**, devoted incredible energy to pinpointing communist influence in government and industry, an influence that zealots detected in New Deal social programs, strong labor protections and trade union militancy, and the civil rights movement, which Representative John Rankin of Mississippi denounced as "communistic bunk." Operating in a similar vein, Senator **Joseph McCarthy** launched a crusade in Congress, seeking out subversive elements in Washington and Hollywood. His efforts lost steam only when they were broadcast on national television and public opinion turned against his inquisition (an unforeseen reaction that sparked the first denunciations of the "liberal media"). But of course, the conspiracism didn't stop with the end of the demoted government hearings. Under the fervid anti-communist leadership of **J. Edgar Hoover**, the **Federal Bureau of Investigation** continued to spy on citizens, including via **COINTELPRO**, a counter-intelligence program designed to surveil, infiltrate, discredit, and disrupt left-wing groups. As one official memo put it, the aim was to "enhance the paranoia endemic in [dissident] circles" and convince activists that **FBI** agents lurked "behind every mailbox." A letter sent by the program tried to pressure **Martin Luther King Jr.** to kill himself. The **CIA** abetted the cause with **Operation CHAOS**, initiated by President **Lyndon Johnson** in 1967 and expanded by Richard Nixon, which "infiltrated antiwar groups, black power organizations, and even women's consciousness raising sessions to determine if foreign communists were secretly directing them."

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