

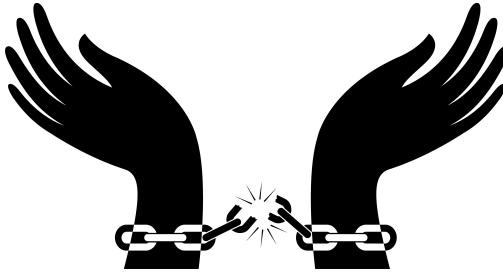
MANIPULATING MARKETS MAKES MOCKERY OF COMPETITION

Web neutrality is a simple concept.

All sources have equal access to the Internet. Recent rulings have reversed that concept and replaced it with a version of "you pay to play." Large companies now buy multiple pages of access on the net, so when you google something as simple as a local restaurant, or try to book a hotel or a plane flight or find a plumber in your neighborhood, you are greeted by pages of listings by Yelp, Yahoo, Trip Advisor, Amazon, Angies List etc. In order to do any of these things you have to go through these parent companies, who take a percentage of your profits to keep you on a noticeable page. Placement depends on how much money you give the parent company, which now owns up to the first 10 pages of listings. Placement in a search engine like Google used to depend upon how many hits you received and how many good reviews you earned. Formerly, if you googled Yosemite tours, every tour company would have their name show up at the same time. With the new ruling, big companies can buy up entire pages of listings so when you google Yosemite Tours, the first five pages consist of listings by the big companies.

If you want your listing to appear anywhere near the front of the pack you must now join a mega-company like Yelp, and become a member of their 'family', for a price and, in return you can list under their banner, insuring you still get viewers for your site. They will also see

that you don't get any "crank reviews" aka bad reviews showing up. You must agree to allow these companies to schedule all your tours, process all the credit card payments, for another fee, and worse, allow them full access to all your financial records. For example, if they discover you booked 100 people every August, from Denton Texas, they would sell that information to your competitor. It's perfectly legal, although unethical, leading to the further ruination of small businesses. It's called the **Amazon model**. In order to sell your product, you must align with Amazon, who controls all your financial records. When they discover a popular product like **Uggs**, they simply make a comparable product called something like **Amazuggs**, and steal the idea and the contacts from the smaller company.



Why should this concern the average consumer?

All reviews are now contrived. Small business is brought to the edge of bankruptcy. Choice is limited to companies that pay exorbitant fees to the Mega-companies. You can no longer simply book something directly. The cost of all products rise because the provider of consumer services now has to ante up between ten and twenty percent of sales to the Internet giants and pass the cost on to the consumer.

-Muir Walker

'LIBERAL CONSPIRATORS' Continues

As **Kathryn Olmsted** documents in her illuminating book *Real Enemies*, U.S. citizens are suspicious of their government for good reason. Government lies have cost livelihoods and lives. In 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** with a plan to deceive Americans into supporting a war on **Cuba** by launching self-inflicted terror attacks on U.S. soil. While that idea was scuttled, U.S. policies of deception and secrecy were par for the course in **Vietnam, Cambodia, Argentina, Guatemala, Indonesia**, and elsewhere. In its final tally, anti-communism is responsible for the deaths of millions of people worldwide.

As these and many other abuses of power were revealed, the public became increasingly perturbed. After **HUAC, McCarthyism, Watergate, COINTELPRO**, and the **Iran-Contra** scandal, anything seemed possible, and many assumed more explosive secrets must lie in store. September 11, 2001, appeared to validate their gravest fears. The **George W. Bush** administration made an unprecedented grab of executive authority to battle a nebulous enemy and cooked up a baseless story about weapons of mass destruction to deceive the public into war with Iraq. Brown University's Watson Institute estimates that over five hundred thousand people have perished as a result of the war on terror, not counting casualties in Syria. As if deception and carnage weren't bad enough, a movement of 9/11 "**Truthers**" are convinced something even more diabolical transpired—the destruction of the World Trade Center towers was an "*inside job*." There was no limit, some believed, to what the government might do. Bush-era conspiracy theorists, Olmsted notes, were "*more interested in making accusations and identifying the government as irredeemably evil than enacting reforms*." The same holds for millions of suspicious minds today.

"The new conspiracism drains the sense that democratic government is legitimate without supplying any alternative standards," Rosenblum and Muirhead write in **A Lot of People Are Saying**. They're correct, but we have to understand the cause. For the last century, anti-communism run amok helped repress legitimate and necessary alternatives, leaving nihilistic reaction and unhinged conjecture to fill the void.

Eight months into the pandemic, a television news station in Kalamazoo, Michigan, broadcast a telling exchange. The newscaster stood in a desolate suburban parking lot, reporting on the reaction to the state's new Covid-19 restrictions. The owner of a nearby establishment, a weary-looking older man, walked up and told the host he had something to say. He was resisting the shutdown and wanted to say why.

"My government leaders have abandoned me," he said. "They've put me in a position where I have to fight back." Four trillion dollars of stimulus money was given to special-interest groups and campaign donors, he continued, "enough money to give every family, every family in this country, \$20,000 to go home for two months." If he were given that sort of support, the man said, he gladly would have closed shop and let the virus settle down. "*But I'm not going to do it alone*." When asked if he would continue to violate the state order, the man was defiant. "*This isn't a state order; this is a conspiracy, a tyranny ... and I've got patriots coming out and supporting me*." The eighty-second clip encapsulated the ways government failures fuel conspiratorial thinking. On one level, the man was correct and his indignation justified. When the bailout funds were dispersed in the spring of 2020, a conspiracy of sorts was indeed afoot—bankers and corporate executives made a mad grab for public money with few strings attached, while regular people, who should have been paid to stay home, scraped by on crumbs. But he was wrong to imagine patriotism and a reckless disregard for public health as the solution to a problem caused by plutocracy. After all, the rich can share citizenship status with poor and working people and still dispossess them.

Numerous studies show that insecure, vulnerable, and threatened populations are more susceptible to **conspiracism**. "Conspiratorial ideation" is driven by both ideology and instability. Feelings of powerlessness, research shows, predict such beliefs. In *Republic of Lies*, Anna Merlan cites an analysis of letters by readers of **The New York Times** and **Chicago Tribune** between 1890 and 2010 that found that conspiracy theories fluctuated in response to times of enormous social upheaval, with the first spike around 1900. Research also indicates that conspiracy beliefs are high particularly among members of stigmatized minority groups. But as Merlan rightly points out, these groups have well-founded grounds for mis-

trust, given the violent history of white supremacy in this country. Not every community's sense of persecution is equally valid.

In a perverse way, many prominent conspiracy theories are a cry for justice and connection, even if they frame the world in a Manichean binary of good versus evil, shunning a structural analysis along with complexity and contingency—positing a cadre of cartoon villains who possess the incredible ability to mastermind world events, leaving nothing to chance. Nevertheless, such theories are typically populist in form, in that they purport to expose the destructive actions of a power elite against regular, unwitting people (a power elite sadly often imagined in ways shot through with anti-Semitism). QAnon's slogan, "**Where we go one, we go all**," often shortened to **#WWG1WGA**, evokes the Wobbly motto, "**An injury to one is an injury to all**," by way of the Three Musketeers. It's a mash-up of cultural references, stereotypes, thwarted expectations, and dashed idealism. No doubt, many conspiracists are irredeemable racists and authentic fascists, but there are undoubtedly some who would likely be receptive to other messages if they were as omnipresent and aggressively promoted. We'll never know how many people would prefer the opportunity to have a face-to-face conversation with a community organizer instead of watching a talking head spout nonsense online, because they never get such a knock on the door and a chance to talk. Far from the country of civic associations described by **Alexis de Tocqueville** in **Democracy in America**, the U.S. today is a land of anomie where, sociologists observe, a growing number of people suffer from an "**epidemic of loneliness**."

The spread of misinformation and fake news has inspired hand-wringing among liberals, who bemoan the public's gullibility and lack of knowledge. I confess I've wrung my hands, too. But it's not enough to denounce fake news or bewail the inability of regular readers to verify facts or "trust science" (a telling phrase since "trust" is unthinking, an act of faith rather than critical reflection—it means, in effect, know your place). Of course, some people could use a look in the mirror—many liberals spent the Trump years deeply invested in "**Russagate**," which played into dated, xenophobic Cold War clichés about "the Russians" and exaggerated foreign influence while failing to acknowledge homegrown threats to democracy. After all, it was the Electoral College that handed Trump the presidency, not **Vladimir Putin**. Worse still, liberals came to lionize the very institutions—the **FBI** and **CIA**—that have been the primary agents of counter-subversive conspiracies, trampling liberties and destroying lives around the world.

As **Jonathan Swift** quipped in 1721, "*Reasoning will never make a Man correct an ill Opinion, which by Reasoning he never acquired*." Ideologies are always shaped by emotions and informed by lived experience. The man in Kalamazoo represents millions who are justifiably angry because they have indeed been abandoned, and who are desperately grasping for explanations that make sense of their circumstances. The challenge is reaching them before mendacious narratives do. But given the right wing's long and effective assault on labor unions, quality free public education, and nonprofit media—the means and channels through which understanding generally spreads—that is increasingly difficult.

The bipartisan project of undermining the left in this country has been, quite literally, a fool's errand. By destroying the social solidarity, economic equality, and class conscious worldview that a robust, organized left helps provide, ruling elites have created a vacuum in which unhinged conspiracies propagate. Far from being a rational system as proponents claim, capitalism ineluctably tends toward the illogical and ludicrous. Plutocrats will embrace and promote paranoia as long as it is profitable; manufactured lunacy provides useful cover, distracting the public from unpopular policies (tax cuts, attacks on unions, a decimated safety net), just as obsessively naming enemies (**Democrats, the press, communists, socialists, antifa, anarchists, feminists, intellectuals, "woke" students**, and so on) deflects responsibility and blame. In the memorable words of **Stephen Bannon**, conservatives counteract the allegedly liberal media by "*flood[ing] the zone with shit*." The goal is not to manufacture consent but to promulgate confusion, and digital capitalism expands the arsenal used to assault our senses. (In 2020, videos endorsing false claims of widespread voter fraud were viewed on YouTube more than 138 million times during the week of the election alone; polls soon showed that one-third of Americans believed that voter fraud helped Joe Biden win.) "Those who persistently blame others for indulging in conspiracies have a strong tendency to engage in

plots themselves," Theodor Adorno smartly observed in 1952, and so it goes today.

The world is a complicated place, and we are permeable, interconnected beings subject to infection by ideas and viruses. We are connected across time and space: our beliefs shaped by past events, our bodies impacted by what happens on the other side of the planet, our lungs filled with air exhaled in the next room. Autonomy is an impossibility. Faced with the prospect of this revelation, some recoil, taking solace in revanchist notions of separation, nationalism, and self-reliance laced with magical thinking.

To have a chance of bringing people back to reality, or preventing them from losing touch in the first place, we will need to speak to their apprehensions and misgivings. Consider the growing suspicion of vaccines, which correlates with religious affiliation and higher socioeconomic status, making it one of the preferred conspiracy theories of the comparatively privileged. While anti-vaxxers are a serious threat to public health, there are plenty of reasons to be wary of the medical and pharmaceutical industries. Bill Gates using vaccinations to microchip the masses is not one of them. (Bill Gates blocking researchers from waiving intellectual property protections to make Covid vaccines available to people in poor countries is the real concern.) Or take speculation about the source of Covid-19. The fact is, viruses don't care about the imaginary boundaries human beings construct, whether those are national borders or the species barrier. Like other zoonotic diseases, the coronavirus jumped from one creature (likely a bat or pangolin) to our kind. It did so because industrial patterns of land use and meat production—picture clear-cut forests, crowded factory farms, and so-called wet markets—push human and nonhuman animals into ever-more intimate contact. In other words, while Covid-19 was not concocted in a Chinese lab or caused by 5G wireless towers, it has political dimensions worth unraveling and discussing, particularly if we want to prevent the next deadly pandemic.

An ancient habit of the human mind, conspiracism will never be entirely stamped out, but it can be diminished if we deprive it of the instability, inequality, and isolation on which it feeds. "*We will not be a less paranoid country until we are a fairer one*," Merlan correctly observes. **You can't fact-check people out of a problem that requires collective action, mass empowerment, and clearheaded strategy to solve.** Instead of chastisement, we need a credible vision of better society and a recognition that it will take mass movements to manifest it. That means building the one thing nostalgic right-wingers and neoliberal centrists both hate to see—an organized and mobilized multiracial working class fighting for their shared interests. It will take a conspiracy of epic proportions to counteract this country's ruinous and unrelenting war on people's ability to come together for the common good, **but that's the only way we'll all ever be able to breathe.**

from the book: **'Remake the World.'**
By **Astra Taylor** hiddendriver.com

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is getting fixed
over at

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