**Cultural Plunge Review: *Conspiracy Theory 101***

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# **Introduction**

In truly understanding a culture (or sub-culture), according to McAuliffe (2020) one must understand culture in the context of the discourse. In general, discourse is defined as “a system of thought, a network of historically, socially and institutionally held beliefs, categories, statements, and terms that give meaning to the world,” as culture consists of “a group of people who share particular discourses” (McAuliffe, p. 58). An equally important component of this cross-cultural conversation is *diversity,* which McAuliffe defines as: “ the existence of variety in human expression . . .” (p. 63). No less relevant, The Tuskegee Institute Cooperative Extension (2021) defines *inclusion* as “an outcome to ensure that those that are diverse actually feel and/or are welcomed.” Here I would add that in this realm, the tolerance, acceptance and celebration of diversity and inclusion are no less important in practicing true cultural awareness in counseling and all other areas of personal and professional life.

Honestly, in full disclosure even as a casual Gnostic consciousness explorer with Buddhist/Taoist influences, I had little idea what to expect as I commenced my latest research journey, a plunge deep into the underground world and fast-rising sub-culture of the so-called “conspiracy theorist.” If in fact I were ever to encounter a true “conspiracy theorist” as a counselor or psychotherapist, it would indeed be essential to conduct diligent research into this complicated sub-culture matrix and its values, as it would undoubtedly prove invaluable meeting anyone of a disparate cultural perspective or holding alternative views of reality from one’s own in this diverse humanoid realm. My experience with these unique people and this fascinating subject thus far is limited to the myriad exaggerated, biased reports and subtle microaggressions of the generally one-sided mainstream media—almost universally labeling and branding them as kooks, crazies, or dangerous subversives and misfits spreading dangerous anti-government/anti-corporate ideas about everything from JFK to fake moon landings and aliens to 9/11, stolen elections in the greatest Democracy in the world, Covid (*trauma-based psych op*) and a global New World Order agenda/plot utilizing mass insidious vaccinations to further enslave and/or de-populate the human race. There are, in fact, countless sub-genres of the conspiracy theory culture (the alien conspiracy, the Illuminati conspiracy, the Deep State conspiracy, the fake history conspiracy, the false or simulated reality conspiracy, i.e. *The Matrix*) and a labyrinthine multitude of others, the details of which are far beyond the scope of this investigation (Icke, 1999. McGowan, 2004. Dehaven-Smith, 2013).

Full disclosure, in preparation for this assignment I did re-watch many *X-files* episodes, and several Stanley Kubrick, Oliver Stone and David Lynch films for additional conspiratorial background into this fascinating subject. Simply for the sake of due diligence, I also revisited *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) and reviewed the penultimate conspiracy films, *Conspiracy Theory* (1997) starring Mel Gibson, and *They Live* (1988), a cult classic horror film which writer-director John Carpenter matter-of-factly declared was *in fact* a documentary about the evils of “unrestrained capitalism,” not a work of science fiction (Goldberg, 2018). (I also read some Kafka, just to be safe.) For the purposes of this assignment, the main crux of my research consisted of reviewing a different non-fiction documentary, “Do You Believe in Aliens: Conspiracy Road Trip (UFO Documentary),” produced by *Real Stories/Warner Bros.* (2021).

# **A Brief Recent History of Conspiracy (and Oppression)**

Although quickly forgotten in the fog of war and easily ignored under the reigns of post-industrial progress, the vast, historical oppression of the less powerful by more dominant groups (or parasitic Archon entities under the guise of Aryan manifest destiny or Zionist hegemony, depending on which theory one chooses to believe) is undeniable. Countless scores of Native American tribes were either exterminated or dehumanized, eviscerated of their ancient culture, cruelly exiled to government reservations and shamefully relegated to second-class citizenship in a few short decades (McAuliffe, 2020. Colwell-Chanthaphonh, C., 2005). Meanwhile, generations of the descendants of African slaves (those wrapped in chains and forcibly relocated to America and the Caribbean to enrich the burgeoning economy of the Anglo-American empire) have themselves been subjected to unspeakable acts of torture, violence, racism, segregation, discrimination, inequality, inequity and historical trauma, the socio-political, emotional and spiritual consequences of which linger to this day (Mohatta et al, 2014. Quigley, 1981). Nevertheless, as few conspiracy theorists would likely deny, nary a select handful of sub-cultures in our society have been generally oppressed, ostracized, silenced or demonized in recent days as much as the so-called “conspiracy theorist.” (At least according to the average conspiracy theorist as my precursory bit of research thus far indicates, exploring this fast-growing sub-culture of admitted paranoids, would-be prophets and proud misfits embedded within our eclectic yet deeply divided populace.)

Historian Dieter Groh (1987) characterized conspiracy theory as a universal phenomenon in human history hardly specific to any time or place. This concept is easily confirmed reviewing documentary reviews of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the “fictional” works of Mr. Shakespeare (a/k/a Christopher Marlowe, Sir Francis Bacon, Edward De Vere or whoever The Bard really was) such as *Julius Caesar,* *Hamlet,* *MacBeth, Othello* and so on (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). As any real conspiracy theorist will gladly educate the uninitiated (also known in conspiracy lingo as “normies” or “sheeple”) the term “conspiracy theorist” itself was, allegedly, a purposeful and strategic creation of the Central Intelligence Agency. Presumably, the C.I.A. perverted the legal term “conspiracy” (an agreement between two or more parties to engage in an illegal act) in order to dissuade or dismiss significant dissent, questioning or investigation into the mainstream narrative of the JFK assassination (deHaven-Smith, 2013). *How has that worked out thus far?* The term and the context in which it (“conspiracy theorist”) is used has since been largely a “media-constructed, ritualized means of publicly degrading a claim AND claimant simultaneously” (Husting, 2006). According to Husting, these terms (“conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”) are “epithets” which simultaneously “tarnish the intellectual and moral competence of the speaker and the validity of the claim” itself (p. 2). It is no surprise then that the conspiracy theorist community-at-large collectively disdains the mainstream media and most other institutions (as shameful, amoral, subservient tools and propaganda spinsters of the oppressive corporatocracy-ruled government and deep state intelligencia.) And thus, the conspiracy theorist dutifully monitors mainstream news/social media to observe, analyze and decode the inherent subliminal Masonic messages of disinformation, misinformation, fearmongering, disassociation-and-trauma-based mind control and outright propaganda which the powers that be so blatantly dispel to disempower and enslave the masses, allegedly.

The conspiracy theorist does not believe that the government loves you or that any government or other powerful institution in general can even be trusted any further than one can throw them. (*Did you say overthrow the government?)*  There are countless subliminal symbols and messages embedded almost everywhere, hidden in plain sight, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, mostly encoded at the direction of occult mystery schools and other unseen powers (Webster, 1964. Steiner, 1919. Steiner, 1904. Robison, 1797)*. Secret societies run the world*. In essence, they (conspiracy theorists) believe, for instance, that the official explanation of the JFK assassination (The Warren Commission Report, 1964) and the majority of subsequent media portrayals purporting lone gunman and rabid Communist Lee Harvey Oswald and his magic bullet as working alone to kill Kennedy (despite Oswald’s proven ties to the CIA and endless reports intricately exposing Kennedy’s countless cabal of enemies) are no less than absurd. In fact, as the diligent conspiracy theorist would allege, a precursory look at history alone reveals that the rather uncreative alleged Powers That Be have attempted to bamboozle the public with this tired, old “crazed lone gunman” scenario/diversion to the point of absolute hubris, i.e. the assassinations of Archduke Ferdinand, Abraham Lincoln, Robert Kennedy, MLK, John Lennon, etc. (McGowan, 2014. Kurtz, 2006.) The average conspiracy theorist is likely to believe that the historic American catastrophe known as 9/11 was some kind of “inside job,” (*supernatural sacrificial ritual)* and that it is rather implausible if not impossible that a handful of foreign terrorists with box-cutters and a few wayward jetliners could bring the entire American Empire to its knees in obliterating, literally vaporizing, a massive super-structure like the Twin Towers into dust in a matter of mere seconds. *What will they come up with next? Holograms and huge-scale death ray weapons?*

And as it is likely well known by most, the vast range of conspiracy theory beliefs regarding the global pandemic lockdowns and universal masking of the world in 2020 and onward to today have caused an unprecedented oppression of this group—including but not limited to a general ostracization from friends, family and coworkers; mass censorship by an authoritarian technocracy; relentless media smearing and trolling; surreptitious shadow-banning; and a near-ubiquitous suspension or permanent removal from major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. What is next pray tell? Permanently banning the very President of the United States himself from social media?*

# **Conspiracy Road Trip**

In the cheeky non-fiction YouTube documentary, *Do You Believe in Aliens .* . ., British comedian-journalist Andrew Maxwell accompanies five confirmed conspiracy theorists on a social experiment/road trip across America. Along their journey, each one will present a conspiracy theory which Maxwell will attempt to debunk. First up, unabashed conspiracy subject Bridget claims that extra-terrestrials routinely visit Planet Earth and that she personally had such an encounter at a busy freeway intersection while living in L.A, and many other such supernatural experiences since she was a young girl. A bit surprising, several of her fellow conspiracy theorists expressed their own doubts regarding her story of the California UFO encounter, mainly due to the heavily populated location and the apparent lack of witnesses or photographic evidence. Bridget proposed that of course aliens possess the capability to transfix the consciousness of humans at will, if not the very essence of time and space as we so vaguely understand them.

When consulted on the subject of aliens and presented Bridget’s story of high strangeness, SETI astronomer Dr. Seth Shawstack admitted that other forms of life inhabiting the universe is highly possible, but firmly concluded that there is not a very good case for aliens existing among us on Earth. However, fellow conspiracy theorist Darren begged to differ, pointing out the theory that there are certain locations in space that NASA and SETI are not allowed to explore at the strict directives of the military; and, also, that the body language of Dr. Seth appeared to be a bit sketchy.

Leaving California and heading to Arizona, the group allowed 25-year-old Ben to share his story: a UFO encounter as a young child which led to his belief in a creation theory linking humans to extraterrestrials. Visiting Flagstaff, the group met with Mr. Myers, a leading evolutionary biologist, who expressed his belief that the average alien would likely look nothing like a human. In fact, it would be “ridiculously improbable,” according to Myers.

En route to Area 51 along the so-called UFO Highway, the conspiracy road trippers continued to debate the question of alien visitation. In Vegas, conspiracy theorist and telecom tech Scott claimed that he was attacked by aliens in his own home, beginning with a frightening “mind attack,” and has since been diligently prepping and training with high-caliber weapons in anticipation of an expectant alien invasion. Scott’s main fear is “alien mind control” and he has invented a simple mind shield comprised of multiple layers of tin foil. *Literally, the tin foil hat, seriously? At this point in the video (18:18), I began to suspect this was a subtle but intentionally ludicrous media mock-umentary, like so many, once again predictably designed to denigrate and lampoon the conspiracy theorist. Yet I persisted (much like these determined conspiracy theorists despite the host’s relentless debunking and a rogue’s gallery of professional skeptics) for the sake of this important research assignment.*

The group next traveled to mystical Sedona, and there we finally hear from conspiracy theorist and UFO investigator, Darren, also from the UK. Darren described his experiences investigating multiple cases of animal mutilations which he theorized were linked somehow to a secret underground cabal run by the military-industrial complex. He claims his investigations have made him a target of unknown forces or entities. Group leader Chris arranged for a meeting with a seasoned UFO investigator, Chris O’Brien, in order to debunk Darren’s wild claims. O’Brien shared his equally bizarre theory of a secret health organization perhaps associated with the UN or the WHO which may be sampling livestock in order to find a cure for cancer in humans. Comedian Chris’s plan to debunk Darren’s conspiracy beliefs has clearly backfired.

Next up, we have Franky, a full-time mom from London who would only reveal her story to Chris privately, as they sat together in a café. Franky revealed her experience of a strange energy attack and subsequent visions of an immense extraterrestrial spaceship or city. A psychology Dr. Michael Shermer, publisher of *The Skeptic* magazine (well-known and not popular with the conspiracy theorist community) was the expedition’s final expert debunker. The announcement led to some vehement opposition from Franky, a self-described “open-minded agnostic,” who was familiar with Shermer and considered him a “two-bit hustler.” After listening to the stories of the conspiracy theorists, Shermer offered explanations of group hallucinations, human misperception and his predictable disbelief in the probability of intelligent life visiting our planet. Nevertheless, the group and professional skeptic Shermer shared a lively but respectful discussion and kindly agreed to disagree.

Afterwards, the group, ever closer to Area 51, met with ex-CIA operative, John Lear, billionaire heir of the famous Lear Jet company. Much to the shock and befuddlement of team leader Chris, Mr. Lear matter-of-factly offered a litany of the most bizarre conspiratorial information yet, including different species of aliens in government captivity and thriving civilizations existing this moment on the moon, which was once one of the many moons of Jupiter created inside the King of Planets many eons ago (Cilibrasi et al, 2018). *Is this guy for real?* Finally arriving at their supposed final destination, Area 51, this motley band of conspiracy theorists with skeptical host wander into a clearly marked forbidden zone to take photographs and are promptly and rather roughly detained (off-camera, 39:00) by the military police for trespassing*. Realizing this was perhaps not the most objective documentary ever made, another subtle hatchet job likely presented to confuse and obfuscate the subject, I got off the proverbial conspiracy bus at this point. Is there any conspiracy theory documentary out there that will be unbiased, fair and balanced? Probably not (spoken like a true conspiracy theorist?)*

**Psychology of the Conspiracy Theorist**

Undoubtedly, in general, the conspiracy theorist would be highly skeptical and distrusting of mainstream counseling and, not unlike the Greeks and Italians (McAuliffe, 2020) regard it with “suspicion,” if not be vehemently opposed to engaging in it, finding little value therein (p. 462). This presents a daunting challenge for those of us in academia and mental health who hold these fields in such high esteem (particularly towards the dispositions of Jungian analysis, existential psychotherapy and forward-facing trauma healing in addressing the issues of conspiracy beliefs.) In the realm of counseling, the therapist may not believe the client, whether he/she is a conspiracy theorist, atheist, Christian, Communist, sociopath, schizophrenic, xenophobic, pathological liar, or what-have-you. However, in the interests of cultural awareness, diversity, empathy, equity, fairness, inclusion, the therapeutic relationship and respect for humanity in general, one must believe *not what but* ***that*** *the client believes what they believe.* And from this perspective, work within the worldview or paradigm of the client and his/her phenomenological narrative to build a viable therapeutic relationship and investigate solutions to the client’s issues and concerns. Sadly, all too often this is not the case, as the typical “conspiracy theorist” is routinely and automatically labelled or diagnosed as “crazy” or worse by those who would be in such a position to judge or diagnose.

*What defines a conspiracy theorist?* Clearly, the answer depends upon whom one asks. Similarities are revealed between the conspiracy theorist and the culture of the Irish Catholic, which McAuliffe (2020) describes as having “a high tolerance for unrealistic thinking” (p. 458). Similar correlations can be drawn to the largely ignored or derided indigenous knowledge and wisdom of Native Americans which provides “an alternative perspective on human experience” that differs from “Western empirical science” and includes ”an interconnectedness with natural and supernatural realms” (McAuliffe, 2020, p. 367, 395). In citing Bellah et al (1996) McAuliffe describes the typical Euro-American’s penchant for “courage and lonely individualism” as characteristics of the American hero (i.e., John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson (*Mad Max-*Australia), *Batman*, etc.) and thus “*some young people may actually be attracted to an ideal of aloneness rather than togetherness”* (Bellah et al, p. 146). In this eloquent description, we can definitely see shades of the lone, truth-seeking conspiracy theorist archetype so often portrayed in literature and cinema. In fact, the “underdog” is a longstanding (Jungian) theme seen in stories from the Bible (*David and Goliath*) to *Robin Hood* (Cologan, 2021. Jung, 2017).

Douglas et al (2017) citing Goertzel (1994) described them as individuals who believe in explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups (Douglas, p. 538). The research of Douglas suggests that that these people “may be drawn to conspiracy theories when—compared with non-conspiracy explanations—they promise to satisfy important social psychological motives that can be characterized as epistemic (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), existential (e.g., the desire for control and security), and social (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group) . . .” (Douglas, p. 538.)

In further expounding on the psychology of the conspiracy theorist, Professor Karen Douglas, a social psychology professor at the University of Kent (which holds direct ties to the aristocracy and royal elites of England, France Italy and Belgium) proposes that individuals are drawn into the realm of the conspiracy theorist largely due to the following factors: *when they are anxious; or feel powerless; especially those lacking sociopolitical control; and those of objectively low status due to ethnicity or income (*p. 539-540). According to Douglas, “Conspiracy belief has also been linked to prejudice against powerful groups and those perceived as enemies” (Douglas, 2017, p. 540, citing Imhoff and Bruder, 2014, Kofta and Sedek, 2005*). Prejudice against the powerful? Like whom, the royal elites? Seriously?*

The iconic conspiracy theorist himself, author/philosopher David Icke (2020), describes the mainstream media’s oft-contradictory characterization of the conspiracy theorist as either “dangerous subversives” and “social and political malcontents who lack reason and hate our *democratic* way of life;” or as “imbeciles” and “arrogant fools” who “trot out crazy theories based upon little knowledge and no evidence.” As Icke reasons: “*Which is it? It can’t be both. Unless society is so fragile it can’t withstand the opinions of idiots” (p. 1).*

# **Conclusion**

In describing the use/abuse of the term “conspiracy theorist” as commonly presented in mainstream media and academia, Dunn (2005) states that this discourse reinforces the idea of a collective identity which contains implicit vocabularies of motive not unlike the terms, *trauma survivor* or *domestic violence victim.* As a result, these individuals are essentially boxed into “social categories that in themselves constitute a kind of explanation” towards an implied motive or behavior, and thus, cultural ideologies and stereotypes are created, maintained or transformed by the powers who control mass media and other major institutions (Husting, 2006, p. 12). In the collective eyes of the mainstream, those who would believe or critically examine the possibilities of so-called conspiracies are increasingly derided as odd, socially unacceptable or mentally ill at best, a danger to society at worst, and proverbially rendered a spot amidst the social status a few rungs above the paranoid schizophrenic, the satanic worshiper or the serial killer.

Well known as “the father of public relations,” Edward Bernays (1928) not only examined but promoted this type of subtle propaganda and the psychology of influencing the masses (utilizing presupposition, repetition, disinformation, confusion, cognitive dissonance and other covert forms of hypnosis) in great depth almost a century ago. Bernays presented the theory that “invisible” entities/people create and control the flow of knowledge in society and thus rule over the masses “with a monopoly on the power to shape thoughts, values and citizen response” (Olsen, 2005, p. 28.) In his fictional totalitarian dystopia, *1984,* Orwell (1949) similarly examined an extreme, horrific and perhaps prophetic version of these dangerous ideologies and practices, and many others including blatant propaganda and mass mind control via the concepts of “doublethink” and “thought crime.” As Seaman (2019) eloquently describes:

“*Orwell astutely dramatizes how the orchestrated, amplified, and intrusive lies of*

*totalitarian regimes endanger “the very concept of objective truth” and “a*

*consensus reality,” and he shares his alarm over “the erosion and corruption of*

*memory”* (p. 18).

Meanwhile, the persistent conspiracy theorist has refused to crumble like the iconic Twin Towers or succumb to this widespread derision and oppression, largely driven or influenced by the government-corporate-controlled media (which undoubtedly affects the collective unconscious in ways we can only imagine.) On the contrary, the conspiracy theorist has generally embraced this archetypal anti-hero role (if not the derogatory term—most prefer “truther” or “alternative/independent researcher”) with aplomb, ironic humor, resilience and a strange kind of pride. Overall, the conspiracy theorist values honesty and integrity; open-mindedness, curiosity, knowledge and wisdom; diligence, persistence, individual sovereignty and autonomy while maintaining loyal affiliations and empathy with their like-minded community; not to mention a deep desire for full disclosure over lies, deceit, obfuscation, stonewalling, gaslighting and, ironically, conspiracy.

Essentially the seemingly ubiquitous and inexplicable policy/ideology of demonizing those who dare question the mainstream narrative may be construed (by some skeptics and others) as nothing short of mass manipulation and propaganda, if not some form of subtle but outright mind control, for so many surreptitious reasons unknown.

*Call me a conspiracy theorist . . .*

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