

John Capone

Dr. Drown

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Conspiracy theory;  
An undervalued social tool.

On the outskirts of mainstream thought lie the extreme and radical forms of many popular ideas. Some of these have been titled “conspiracy theories,” but it is often difficult to know what constitutes one of these views and what can be considered a normal opinion. One belief subject to this label is the theory that the convergence of the neoconservative movement and modern American Christianity is creating a fascist movement. A growing community, composed mostly of libertarians and Christians, has published its complaints and observations in the years following September 11, 2001. Their works raise a number of questions. Why do they hold and proliferate this belief? What is their position in society? What makes their thinking conspiratorial? Furthermore, is a conspiracy theory deserving of an audience? To begin answering these questions and the additional issues they raise, I must have an understanding of what constitutes a conspiracy theory.

When speaking about the uses of theories in general, Gregor Renner and Dorothea Lage say that,

Theories are representations of specific aspects of the world, which are encompassed and explained... Depending on the theory under consideration, specific aspects or parts of the phenomenon under investigation are highlighted and distinguished. For describing and explaining phenomena, different terms are used depending on the underlying theory and its terminology. (Renner/Lage 1-2)

Conspiracy theories operate in the same way, and use their own, unique language to describe their subjects. In his book *Enemies Within*, Robert Alan Goldberg describes a trait of conspiracy thinking as a belief that, “diverse enemies [have] entered the gates and now [bend] history to their will” (Goldberg 232). In this case the theorists are concerned that Christian groups are allowing the neoconservatives to change the United States from a democracy to a fascist state. The people who hold these conspiratorial beliefs have developed what Timothy Melley calls “agency panic.” He defines this term as, “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by somebody else, that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful external agents” (Melley 62). If the neoconservatives are creating a fascist state, then the American people will lose control of the democracy. Similarly, if American Christians are supporting this move to fascism, then some core beliefs of many believers are being manipulated. In both cases a group is troubled by the loss of control. I agree with Melley’s use of this term, but I will add to it their fear that they may lose control of something in the future. This theory does not believe that the state is currently fascist, but is rather in a process of transition. With a rough idea of what these theories are and what drives people to use them, I find a rough definition of conspiracy thinking for the purposes of this paper. A conspiracy theory is a belief that a group or person who should not be controlling something *is* or *will* soon be controlling it.

With a general idea of the subject being discussed, I would like to learn what types of people are drawn to these beliefs. Michael Kelly discusses a possibility in his article *The Road to Paranoia*. In this article, he explains his theory of “fusion paranoia.” This term refers to, “...views that have long been shared by both the far right and the far left, and that in recent years have come together...” (Kelly 62). If he is correct in his assertion that this is a current

phenomenon, then members of one conspiracy theory community could come from a variety of viewpoints. The theories could be expressing particular agency panics that transcend politics. Both the libertarians and the Christians believe that America may soon become authoritarian, and they feel that something must change to prevent this. They have different perspectives, but in this community of adherents they find a common ground. Whatever their motives for joining the group, they agree that America should remain a democracy. Additionally, Kelly puts forth that,

In its extreme form, paranoia is still the province of minority movements, but the ethos of minority movements...has become so deeply ingrained in the larger political culture that the paranoid style has become the cohering idea of a broad coalition plurality that draws adherents from every point on the political spectrum – a coalition of fusion paranoia. (62-63)

I would agree with Kelly that extreme versions of mainstream thought come from every political perspective, but I would not refer to the collective as a coalition. Within a particular theory there may be a common goal or enemy, but simultaneously there are extreme differences. While both the libertarian and the Christian see fascism as a problem, outside this community a Muslim libertarian might disagree with the Christian's beliefs and vice versa.

There may be a unified community of very different people when dealing with just the theory. However, outside that theory their differences could hold a greater role in their normal interactions. There must be some factor that aligns these people despite their extreme differences. Kelly explains this occurrence as fusion paranoia's "...reject[ion] of [the left and right] bipolar model for a more primal polarity; Us versus Them" (62). The members of one group might find themselves on the same side of a particular issue despite their extreme differences. I would agree with Kelly that the alliance of different people is a result of an *us-them* model. However, I will also argue that the left-right model is not being rejected, but that it is simply a form of the same basic bipolarity. Those on the right are one *us* and those on the left

are their *them* when dealing with politics. For other issues the *us* and *them* might be very different depending on the individual's interests. This polarity exists within many issues, including those found in conspiracy theory. Aliens, the illuminati, and fascists are all *them* to their respective conspiracy theory communities while the theorists themselves are the *us*. These theories serve as explanations for some people about the agency panic they are experiencing. The theory must both explain some lack of control and not conflict with other beliefs held by an individual. The theory that the neoconservatives and Christians are making a fascist America works in this way, with the move towards totalitarianism acting as *them*. By looking at the community that adheres to this view, I will try to demonstrate how an observed loss of control over some aspect of a person's life can drive them to the use of extreme language to describe the opposition. Understanding this phenomenon is vital since it has the potential to effect mainstream thought.

To set up this thinking, I need to first look at the history behind Christianity's participation in American politics. The ideas of some of these theorists draw upon this involvement for support. The most historically concerned document I have found is *Christian Conservatives and Religious Freedom* by William L. Anderson. He explains that, although there was always Christian participation in America, in the past their views had never been identified as conservative. The change came with the widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution in the late 1800's. At this time Christians stood against the theory and voiced their feelings politically, siding with conservatives. Following this was the temperance movement, which was eventually successful in outlawing alcohol during the Prohibition years in the early 1900's. After the fall of Prohibition, little major political activity is mentioned until the 1970's. After *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, Jerry Falwell formed the 'Moral Majority' and Pat Robertson of the '700

Club' became increasingly political. Since then, these new Christian leaders have advocated strong governmental power and have helped the current neoconservative administration by providing it with a strong base. They helped elect President Bush two times and have supported both his increase in the federal government's power and his hostile international policy. For theorists like Anderson, this history serves as a story of Christianity's shift towards a new ideology. With the history in mind, he complains that, "the growth of the central state will ultimately mean less religious freedom, and by not strongly defending private property rights, these Christians are undercutting the very institutions that would increase their freedom to practice their religion unmolested" (Anderson). In essence, theorists like Anderson are observing a strong base of support for a powerful central government from American Christians. They see this as detrimental to both individual and religious freedom.

Anderson represents a large part of this theory's community as both a Christian and a libertarian. Still, many members are more focused on the growth of the government and the effects this has on personal freedom. Most of these people are libertarians like Lew Rockwell, who says in *The Reality of Red-State Fascism* that the problem is, "the dramatic shift of the red-state bourgeoisie from leave-us-alone libertarianism, manifested in the Congressional elections of 1994, to almost totalitarian statist nationalism" (Rockwell). The turning point came on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks caused even the Cato Institute to call for support of government regulations. Since then Rockwell has observed the administration's use of the attacks to expand government power and create a,

...profound cultural change, so that the very people who once proclaimed hatred of government now advocate its use against dissidents of all sorts, especially against those who would dare call for curbs in the totalitarian bureaucracy of the military, or suggest that Bush is something less than infallible in his foreign-policy decisions. (Ibid)

The old right that Rockwell belongs to believes in giving minimal power to the state, but many have moved from this position to that of the new right. They are now willing to sacrifice personal liberty for security through government restrictions. Rockwell and other libertarians have the same problem with Christian support for neoconservatives: they see it as assisting the reduction of personal liberty and allowing the expansion of the government's capabilities.

The other common complaint comes from the more religiously inclined. Christians who have joined the debate may be concerned with the size of the government, but they also worry about the way that Christianity is being used. In his article *George Bush and the Rise of Christian Fascism*, Reverend Rich Lang reiterates many of the same complaints as the libertarians about the expansion of government power, but also adds in his concerns about the Bush administration's Christianity. He says that the current political Christianity, "...is a form of Christianity that is the mirror opposite of what Jesus embodied. It is, indeed, the materialization of the spirit of antichrist: a perversion of Christian faith and practice" (Lang). The difference between Jesus and Bush's religions is that Jesus asked people to change themselves for the better and to serve others as they can, while Bush righteously works to "purge evil from the world through sacred violence" (Ibid). This summarizes the fundamental argument of the Christian segment of this theory's community. Still, it is best not to think of the libertarians and Christians as two separate groups, but rather two perspectives that are complimenting each other in the development of this theory. The politically inclined may place more emphasis on the loss of freedom while the religious deal more often with the manipulation of faith, but their central complaint remains the same. They believe that American Christians are facilitating the spread of a nationalist movement in the post-9/11 American political environment.

This group of theorists is concerned with the current administration and its base's movement towards totalitarianism. The implicit assumption is that a strong central government that uses restrictions to protect its citizens leads to the creation of a fascist state. The theorists may claim that evidence and historical knowledge provide a great deal of support for their case, but this theory must also serve their personal needs in some way. Through my research, I have observed that most of the community is composed of educated people who usually hold libertarian views, Christian views, or both (Alberts; Anderson; Lang; Leupp; Raimondo; Rockwell; Santos). Another important factor is that almost all the discussion has taken place after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and most of the essays attribute a good deal of the problems with the current situation to the administration's actions in the following years. Considering both the variety of people participating and the time they chose to participate at, what does this theory provided them with?

The libertarians, who advocate minimal government action, find themselves in a country where the executive branch can declare war on any perceived threat and homosexuals are not allowed to marry in most states. From their perspective these government actions must seem unacceptable and overly intrusive. In *Everybody's Talkin' About Christian Fascism*, Gary Leupp expresses this sentiment by saying that until a few years ago he was only concerned that someday fascism would return, but that he did not see an active shift towards authoritarianism. That was,

...before the criminal invasion of Iraq...before British officers complained that their U.S. counterparts in Iraq were treating the Iraqis like Untermensch (subhumans, a term the Nazis applied to various non-Aryan groups)...before the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo torture revelations, and the reorganization of the "intelligence community" to better disseminate disinformation in the service of ongoing war...before the Bush campaign to amend the constitution, for the first time to specifically prevent the expansion of liberties. It was before persons in and around the administration defended Japanese-American wartime

concentration camps with an eye towards new camps for other groups in the future. The fascist tide has surged in the interim, as I thought, back in 2002, was very likely. (Leupp)

It was these incidents that changed his concern to fear and have led to his grim prediction for the future. Many of the events he mentions have also upset the mainstream. The difference is that the mainstream did not use the term 'fascist.' It is my belief that these libertarians are well served by a public perception that the country is moving in a fascist direction. The shock value of the term could cause Americans to become concerned, and for those who have moved from the old, small-government, right to the new right to shift back.

As for those in the theory with a more Christian perspective, they have observed a move in American Christianity's concerns from those of social welfare to imposing morality upon others through force. Rev. Rich Lang describes it as, "a theology rooted in the Holiness/Holy War traditions" (Lang). The essential complaint is the same as the libertarians; a group that they formerly identified with is moving in a direction that they see as wrong. By using extreme language, some Christians might become fearful of the dark future that the theory predicts and move in the direction suggested by the theorists. This is caused by a growing agency panic, and extreme language is the solution for some to express their concern to others. This is the type of theorizing that Ingrid Walker Fields calls a "populist conspiracy narrative." These narratives are defined in *White Hope* as,

...theories about the government or other powerful entities, narratives marked by the implication of their own political impotence...the populist conspiracy narrative de-emphasizes political action, focusing instead on raising social awareness about the conspiracy as the means by which citizens will reclaim political power.  
(Fields 158-159)

This type of theory enables them to convey the urgency they feel regarding this issue that they are powerless to correct. If others come to understand their beliefs, the theorists hope that a wider audience will consider taking action to prevent undesirable outcomes.

With a potential reason for the use of radical language, it is time to consider its implications for society. In his book *Call to Liberty*, Anthony Signorelli says that, “since 1990, political rhetoric on the right and left have increasingly used the word ‘fascism’ in an attempt to describe what they see or fear in political culture” (Signorelli 79). He goes on to say that it used to be only small outlying segments of the population who would use this extreme language, but that now this term has even been used by Donald Rumsfeld. This indicates to a slight degree an acceptance of this radical term by the mainstream. The theory described in this paper is not only this theory that is encouraging the word’s acceptance. Along with others who hold extreme views from various perspectives, groups of this type are able to affect society’s thinking. Ed White noticed this influence in his article on the effects of conspiracy theories during the formation of the United States. He says that these theories offer,

...a model of structural analysis from within that assesses and creatively directs innovations within developing ensembles, always attuned to the ways in which early citizens and noncitizens sensed the shakiness, or restrictiveness, or potentialities of emergent social structures. (White 26)

While modern American social structures are already formed, conspiracy thinking still holds this role. The thinking is done by people living in the country in an effort to influence its direction, while simultaneously providing insight into their concerns.

Some see this role of conspiracy theories as extremely dangerous. Goldberg believes that,

Conspiracism demonizes opponents and makes struggle internecine. Victories in such conflicts can only be pyrrhic. Conspiracy thinking has moved beyond a

healthy skepticism of authority. Lacking public confidence, core institutions become unstable and lose their ability to govern. (Goldberg 260)

The theory I have studied does demonize the actions of American Christianity and the administration. Still, I would argue that it should not be viewed as a struggle for victory, but instead as an expression of personal opinion. Holding views similar to mine is Mark Fenster, who explains in the introduction of *Conspiracy Theories* that,

Employing the term “conspiracy theory” serves as a strategy of delegitimation in political discourse. Conspiracy theory has come to represent a political Other to a ‘proper’ democratic politics – a set of illegitimate assumptions that seem to question that the United States is a benign, pluralistic democracy, and that seem to reject the notion that history moves through the triumph of progress and leadership, as well as through the vagaries of coincidence and mistake. (Fenster 2)

Rather than viewing this theory as being illegitimate and outside the realm of political discussion, it should be seen as another voice in the public realm. The theory is not suggesting the destruction of institutions, but rather sees itself as defending true Christian morals and the freedom of Americans. The theorists are not even suggesting that fascism is a current trend. Their fear is that it may develop, and they are expressing this apprehension as part of the ongoing national discussion about the current American political atmosphere. Alasdair Spark also understands the importance of their role for others in the discussion. He says that, “...an awareness of conspiracy theories no longer signals being individually certain of a hidden plot or a secret order, but more of entertaining doubts, often about things which are quite openly visible...” (Spark 59). People outside the conspiracy community will observe their concerns and be able to judge the thinking for themselves. No one is forced to think as the theorists do, but the thinking is in the open for consideration. Not only do I believe that this is a vitally important role, but rather than being dangerous as Goldberg suggests, it is the expression about some of

their discontent with the direction of the system. Their thoughts are deserving of the audience they receive.

In essence, conspiracy theories should not be viewed as strange or abnormal forms of thought. They are a result of the observations people make about the world around them and the conclusions they draw about what should be done in response. These theories are attempting to participate in society's debate over the current state of affairs in the world. While some wish to separate these groups from the overall discussion and dismiss them as ridiculous, it is because the value of these theories is not being recognized. As Robert C. Rowland puts it in his communications studies article *On Defining Argument*, "there is no agreement on the defining characteristics of argument form...or even the meaning of argument itself" (Rowland 2). While it may not be known what exactly an argument is, it is my judgment that separating conspiracy thinking from normal discussion is a mistake. This separation effectively silences the voices of many who are putting forth interesting and potentially useful perspectives. By accepting the functions of conspiracy theorists as active and enthusiastic participants in important debates, I believe that a fuller understanding of any given issue and the imperatives that are being represented in its discussion can be gained.

I, John Capone, declare that I am the sole and original author of this work. This assignment was completed in compliance with the requirements of the course and The George Washington University's Code of Academic Integrity."

John Capone

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