

Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture. By Mark Fenster. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 282 pp. ISBN .

Coincidentally, my reading of Mark Fenster's book, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, took place against the backdrop of the high school shootings in Littleton, Colorado. I raise this point because I am sure that the event, and the various reactions to it, have coloured my reading of Fenster's text and helped my own ideas on the discursive culture of conspiracy theorizing.

Because my research centres on the origins and ongoing deployments of media effects-based explanations of juvenile crime, I followed the events at Columbine with some attention. I was surprised, therefore, to read on a completely unrelated e-mail discussion list an explanation of Littleton completely at odds with my understanding. A list member from Texas, long known to the group for his eccentric postings and conspiratorial worldview, explained apropos of nothing that the shooters in the Columbine high school tragedy were brainwashed by the CIA, and sent into the school on a suicide mission to spur the drive for gun control and the crackdown on individual liberties in the United States. These CIA-sponsored killings, our poster argued, would provide a basis for more restrictive gun control in Colorado and help to discredit the National Rifle Association. This seemed to me, and the majority of list members who voiced public opinions on the topic, self-evidently absurd. The case of our conspiracy theorist was bolstered in the eyes of many, however, when the government of Colorado did indeed take steps to legislate against firearm availability in the days and weeks that followed the shootings. Further, the fact that the killings occurred only days before the NRA's annual convention, and only miles from the Denver convention centre where the event was to take place, had a few members thinking aloud that there were an awful lot of coincidences involved in this single event. When Congressional Democrats took steps to strengthen existing gun legislation in the weeks that followed, a number of our list members spoke out in agreement with our heretofore lone voice. Converts, it seems, had been made.

Living through these exchanges made me grateful for a book like *Conspiracy Theories*. What I was encountering in my e-mail every morning was a fully articulated way of conceptualizing social relations which had never before occurred to me. Fenster's extensive and impressive research, therefore, provided a means of coming to terms with this radical disjunction between the interpretive framework which I used to understand events such as the one at Littleton, and a framework at odds with my own which was now confronting me on a daily basis.

Indeed, easily the strongest section of *Conspiracy Theories* is the first, in which the author outlines three ways of conceptualizing conspiracy theory from the outside in order to highlight the limitations of traditional rejections of it. Beginning with Richard Hofstadter's postwar rejection of conspiracy thinking as a "paranoid style," Fenster argues that traditional conceptions of conspiracy have generally tended more towards dismissal than genuine appraisal or evaluation. Hofstadter, of course, was the historian most closely aligned in the postwar period with the development of a consensus hypothesis of American politics and his arguments helped pave the way for a Cold War fixation on the perceived threat of the mass society. For Hofstadter, conspiracy theory was a form of political extremism bordering on paranoia. Moreover, it threatened to disrupt America's pluralist political structure and consequently comprised a genuine threat to the nation. Fenster argues in the second chapter that this mode of conceptualizing conspiracy theory has remained dominant from the postwar era to today. Its influence could be found in the reaction of the national press and federal politicians to the militia movement in the United States as it emerged as a perceived threat following the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The subsequent Senate inquiry into the militia

movement, Fenster suggests, retained the postwar conception of conspiracy thinking as pathological. The determinations of the inquiry, therefore, were essentially predetermined by the fact that the two most important groups—the senators and the militias—approached each other from radically varying points of view. Fenster correctly observes that this disjunction effectively limits the utility of government inquiry by reducing analysis to the level of labeling (or, worse, namecalling) and restricting recommendations to calls for stepped up surveillance and monitoring. A somewhat different approach to conspiracy theory is provided by the American political left when they attempt to maintain a critique of both contemporary capitalism as well as conspiracy theories which they suggest have the power to lead radicals towards incorrect analyses. Fenster maintains that this approach, which seeks to both disprove conspiracy theories as “wrong” and to illuminate their association with extreme rightist groups, is something of an improvement over the Hofstadterian model. Nonetheless it succumbs to its own form of easy dismissals. Where Fenster’s book succeeds most admirably, I would argue, is in these opening chapters. Here the author compels the reader to examine his or her own biases and prejudices in regard to conspiracy theorizing and to admit the genuine possibility that a more productive mode of conceptualizing conspiracy as an episteme might exist.

The second part of *Conspiracy Theories* seeks to lay the groundwork for just such an understanding by illuminating the ways in which conspiracies are conceptualized from within. The first chapter in this section works to understand the ways in which conspiracy theory places the past and the present into a single interpretive framework. Utilizing the various conspiracy theories which have surrounded the presidency of Bill Clinton, Fenster demonstrates the degree to which conspiracies are built from the constant process of interpretation wherein even the most minute fact or coincidence related to a host of other facts becomes evidence of a wide-scale or global plot. To this end the book is on solid footing. Where this chapter begins to lose its focus, I would contend, is in Fenster’s remobilization of Hofstadter’s conception of paranoia, and his attempt to make that concept useful. He does this by making the link between paranoia and delusion more forceful and highlighting the interpretive desire as an active and endless process. Following the work of Žižek, Deleuze, and Guattari, Fenster argues that conspiracy theory is a displacement of a desire for political significance and a reification of interpretation which fetishizes individual signs. At the same time it places them into interpretive structures which seek to fix their meanings once and for all. This argument is expanded in the following chapter which brings conspiracy-related texts from popular culture—*The X-Files* and *JFK* chief among them—into the picture in order to highlight Fenster’s suggestion that the narrative frame of conspiracy and its interpretive practices are mutually dependent and reinforcing. Fenster argues that because conspiracy interpretation is endless, the conspiracy narrative—both real and fictional—can find no meaningful closure. While these observations may be valid as far as they go, they have a real tendency to reduce conspiracy theorizing to the level of “mere” discourse, stripped of any practical implications beyond the textual. At this point in the book it is difficult to see how Fenster’s suggestion that conspiracy theorizing is a substitution of endless interpretation for political significance leads the analyst to conclusions about the theorists which are more productive than, say, the Senate’s reliance on a problematic conception of conspiracy theory as paranoid.

The final section of the book seemingly seeks to address this very problem. These chapters consist of three separate case studies of specific communities engaged in conspiracy theorizing. The most interesting of these is the first. Chapter 6 addresses Christian conspiracy theory through a close reading of three different eschatological texts in order to provide a picture of a set of interpretive practices and a singular master narrative. This particular study is satisfying insofar as its tight focus highlights Fenster’s exemplary research. In this case he provides the reader with a strong understanding of the particular community

he describes and allows an entry into the types of meanings and narratives that the group produces and circulates. Unfortunately, the remaining chapters are less persuasive. Chapter 7 sets out to demonstrate the often tenuous nature of the conspiracy community, riddled as it is with strongly competing subgroups, each competing for a sort of interpretive dominance. Sadly, this chapter demonstrates a less focused approach to the material and as a result it seems to only scratch the surface of the topic. Indeed, a discussion of the alt.conspiracy newsgroup seems exceedingly brief. This far into the text I had hoped for considerably greater detail and concrete insight on such a rich textual example. The final chapter seems to me to also be something of a missed opportunity. Addressing conspiracy theory as play it deals with theorists whose approach to conspiracy is largely ironic, satiric, or whimsical. This chapter sets out to demonstrate the interaction between playful conspiracy theorists and, for example, computer hackers, fanzine publishers, and organized science fiction fandom, but ultimately the analysis seems overly cursory. Another chance is lost to really examine the interrelationship between conspiracy theorizing and mass culture which has resulted in the particular taste formations which Fenster notes but does not fully examine.

All of which brings us back more or less to the beginning. The relationship between conspiracy theorizing and consumer society is one of the interesting questions that is somewhat lost in the shuffle of this book's emphasis upon conspiracy as narrative. Particularly interesting is the self-adopted position of the conspiracy theorist as an opponent of not only the dominant political order but also of the existing cultural regime. At the same time, however, conspiracy theorists selectively interpret the dominant culture as proof of their own particular interpretations of existing political structures. This tension is one which could be more fully elaborated in Fenster's analysis. A clearer focus on the relationship of conspiracy and mass culture would, I think, also bring us full circle to the work of Richard Hofstadter which is so crucial in establishing the parameters of the discussion. Postwar conceptions of mass culture were inextricably tied to arguments about the potentially totalitarian nature of mass society. The New York Intellectuals who championed the consensus view of American politics as they turned against Marxism following the Second World War promoted a faith in the liberating potential of the individual which was set in opposition to the burgeoning trepidation with which they regarded bureaucracies and governments. Those postwar fears, it seems to me, have found their fullest expression in the 1990s in the hands of conspiracy theorists. Like the postwar intellectuals, conspiracy theorists place their faith in the interpretive power of the inner-directed individual and hold a deep mistrust of governments and bureaucracies of all kinds. Indeed, with their championing of the lone voice raised against an oblivious or indifferent mass society one could argue that in some ways the conspiracy theorist is the truest inheritor of the contrarian position occupied by the New York Intellectuals in the decades following the end of the war.

This suggestion is dependent, however, on an analysis which takes into account the ways in which the underlying basis of conspiracy theorizing seems to be a close attention to individual rights—as in the militia movement's focus on the American *Bill of Rights*—set against notions of collective agreement and social norms. Little specific attention is paid to this question in *Conspiracy Theories*, although some indication of Fenster's position occasionally shows itself. He writes, for example, that

In balancing possible civil-liberties infringement with the need to counter this super-human force [militias], civil liberties may have to be sacrificed to some degree; as Dees notes in an insipid analogy borrowed from President Clinton, people were initially opposed to the small nuisance of metal detectors at airports, and now accept them as minor inconveniences for the greater good of safety. (p. 49)

What makes this analogy "insipid" is left for the reader to guess, although I would suggest that it is hardly as self-evident as Fenster seems to want to suggest here. Indeed, Clinton's airport metal detector analogy surfaced again following the Littleton shootings

when he argued that background checks on gun purchasers at gun shows would be a similarly minor inconvenience. The NRA met that suggestion with the type of scorn that Fenster uses here and I would suggest that it is indicative of the degree to which the analysis of each is dependent on the privileging of individual civil liberties over collective safeties. Ultimately Fenster's failure to articulate clearly his own views on the philosophical point which so crucially underscores both conspiracy theorizing and anti-populist sentiment interferes with his ability to suggest the continuities between postwar conceptions of conspiracy as paranoia and his own articulation of conspiracy as paranoid play.

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