

When Theorists Conspire: An Inter(re)view Between Mark Fenster and Jack Bratich

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Curator's Note:

When I served as the book review editor for the *Journal of Communication Inquiry (JCI)* last year, I found myself bored with the convention of monological reviews, frustrated at the lack of open space for communication among scholars in academic journals, and curious as to whether a fruitful exchange of ideas could emerge when that space is provided in an academic journal. This dialogue-based review by Jack Bratich (the reviewer) and Mark Fenster (the author of *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*) is an extension or a continuation of a previous conversation between the two scholars that was published in *JCI* several months ago, with the role of each scholar reversed here: Before, Mark reviewed Jack's book, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, and posed Jack a series of questions, and now Jack turns the table, reviewing Mark's book and interrogating him. I encourage the readers to also visit the *JCI* review where the conversation between Jack and Mark began, and to view more detailed information on the development of this collaborative project (Fenster & Bratich, 2009).

In the *JCI* review, Mark referred to Jack as a "fellow traveler in the world of conspiracy theories" (which is also how Jack feels about Mark, I believe). Although both travel the same or similar terrain, the path each scholar chooses is quite different (although sometimes their paths would cross), which is something the readers will get to see after reading both reviews. It is the differences that both make these travelers' tales interesting and enrich conspiracy theories as a scholarship. I hope Mark's and Jack's traveling tales will encourage many others to join and travel in the world of conspiracy theories, adding more stories to the ones that Mark and Jack started.

~ Hye-Jin Lee

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Richard Hofstadter, inventor of the term "paranoid style," remarked that conspiracy theories are cyclical, hibernating and then reemerging under particular conditions. So it is, perhaps, with the discourse that studies them. Mark Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories* (1st edition) was published in the late 1990s, at the

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end of what Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen (2001) called the "conspiracy decade" and at the peak of what Jonathan Alter (1997) called the "age of conspiracism." Ten years later, Fenster has produced a significantly revised and updated version to once again help shape the scholarly discussion about the American phenomenon of conspiracy theories.

Even in its earlier edition, *Conspiracy Theories* stood out as the most sophisticated and nuanced analysis among book-length treatments. Firmly grounded in cultural studies, the work went against prevailing opinion by refusing to dismiss conspiracy theories at the outset (neither as a cultural curiosity nor a social danger). Instead, the analysis positioned its object within a broader political project of populism and the ongoing attempts by bottom-up forces to understand the relationship between secrecy and power.

Much of this framework is retained in the updated version. The first two chapters do the most work to articulate the politics of conspiracy theories. The first chapter provides an excellent summary of the above-mentioned Hofstadter's germinal work, situating Hofstadter in a Cold War, consensus-liberal tradition. Fenster accomplishes a rarity in intellectual work by making centrism visible and marked, undermining that center's ideological self-effacement as normative. His contextualization also demonstrates how political centrism's fear of populism animates the lineage of anti-conspiracy theory discourse. Finally, perhaps to the surprise of many readers, Hofstadter's lineage is shown to be the basis for more progressive leftists. Fenster notes the anti-populist, anti-extremist characteristics of current left anti-conspiracy theories, most notably those of Chip Berlet. Fenster clears the conceptual deck with the key political claim in this chapter: "Conspiracy theory [CT] does not pose a threat from outside some healthy center of political engagement; rather, it is a historical and perhaps necessary part of capitalism and democracy" (p. 11). It is the task of the committed cultural studies scholar, then, to assess the phenomenon politically.

The second chapter continues this line of thinking around populism and the center, only now, via the concrete example of the mid-1990s U.S. militias. More specifically, the focus is on the Congressional "hearing" that made sense of militias by articulating a centrist public while putting marginals in the spotlight. Fenster locates this act within the centrist lineage of pathologization that presumes a healthy political order. The first edition's contextualizing discussion of the mid-1990s public lamentations over the loss of civil society does not make it into this edition. This well-researched and persuasive chapter ends with a useful explication of populism, one that both organizes the book and offers a tool to assess social movements and conspiracy theories. Also here, we see an initial attempt to define the politics of CTs, as they are given much potential, but fraught with qualifications: "they may well address real structural inequities, albeit ideologically . . . [and] in a simplistic and decidedly unpragmatic form" (p. 90).

The next three chapters, in a part called "Conspiracy Theory as Cultural Practice," begin to elaborate the alleged internal structures of CTs, which presumably lead to these political dead-ends. Chapter three focuses on the interpretive practices embodied in conspiracy theorizing. Here, CTs are reduced to a politics of the signifier, and then many theoretical resources are mobilized by the author to understand that signification. More time is spent here on theorizing, rather than analyzing, and much is made of one example: Carroll Quigley's writings as impetus for anti-Clinton CTs. Chapters 4 and 5

examine the narrative structures and the role of pleasure and play in CTs, respectively. The latter chapter expresses a commitment to making the *individual* conspiracy theorist central to the analysis. Pleasure is understood via the primacy of individual reception, a kind of uses and gratifications approach, albeit with a more sophisticated explication of desire. Even the failure of attempts to form a conspiracy theory community is analyzed through the lens of individualism (by way of the hyper-suspicious character makeup of members). Individualism is tempered in this second edition with the recognition, albeit brief and dangling, of the surveillance, harassment, and infiltration that determine potential community formation.

Among the hodgepodge of textual approaches to CTs in Part II, the most politically relevant (and challenging) one, I would argue, is the analysis of desire and interpretive actions. This Žižekian approach to CTs (in which Žižek himself participates) seeks to understand the conditions of a narrative's failure by examining the deep-seated and unconscious desire for that failure by the narrators. Fenster is not alone here. Jodi Dean's recent work on CTs takes a similar approach, a departure from her earlier work in "Declarations of Independents" (2000). It is a curious combination: a seemingly intimate account of CTs' inner workings (logic, structure, affective investment, desire, pleasure) via a rather distanced and prophylactic engagement. While grounded in radical politics (Leninism in Žižek's case), this focus on the internal desiring production of narratives — and by extension, narrators — ultimately replays the psychologization of politics that began, at least, with Harold Lasswell's study of political personalities, and runs through Hofstadter's paranoid style into the 1990s problematizations of CTs.

The sixth chapter, on popular eschatology and Christian millenarianism, is an excellent summary of some of the apocalyptic trends that fuel right wing politics today. It was prescient when it came out, and it continues to be relevant today. However, given its quite tangential relationship to conspiracy theories, it remains an oddball inclusion (more so in this version than in the first edition).

The final chapter is brand new, and it presents a case study that embodies much of what was discussed in the book's theoretical arc. The 9/11 Truth Movement represents what can be seen as the condensation of many conspiracy threads (formal structures, theorists' drives, populism, an attempt to form a community of researchers, and the government bodies that attempt to neutralize their effects). The 9/11 TM is a kind of multi-mediated populism within the cyclical return of conspiracies and their accountants. The chapter demonstrates a skillful and well-researched knowledge-base of the main tenets and conflicts within the 9/11 TM.

While containing a number of section fragments, the chapter has its primary focus on the rhetorical dynamic between two investigative bodies, the White House-appointed 9/11 Commission (aka the Kean Commission) and the 9/11 TM. The key question here is how does the state (in this case, the commission) attempt to preempt CTs? And does it make a difference? Fenster details how the Commission was aware both of CTs and, particularly, of its own potential to become the new Warren Commission. This knowledge led to an extensive public relations campaign that sought to dissuade such interpretations. Fenster details well the commission's rhetorical strategies, such as the claim that it was going to leave no stone unturned. In a new contribution to the understanding of the Commission, Fenster definitively

demonstrates that it sought to control its own meaning through meta-narratives (before, during, and after the Commission's empanelment).

Despite its best PR tactics, the Commission would be considered flawed and a whitewash akin to the Warren Commission. Many of the skeptics would eventually form what is known as the 9/11 TM. For Fenster, it is the inexorable logic of conspiracy theory that led to this result. He briefly notes the Commission's insiderness, but little to no analysis takes place on the extent of this blockage or its significance. Instead, we are left with the Commission's rhetorical strategies, which end up being no match for the Truth Movement's. While the chapter does a good job examining each side's preventive semiotic strategies, it lays out their terrain in a particular way.

Perhaps this stems from Fenster's opening statement, in which he admits his belief in the official account. But this adherence doesn't just indicate an epistemological preference. In describing the commission's work, one gets the sense that they were primarily hampered by an inevitable uptake of the alternative accounts, rather than by an administration that incessantly created obstacles to performing the work. Even Kean and Hamilton (the co-chairs) have stated that the commission was "set up to fail." One doesn't get the sense of this when, in the concluding paragraph of the section, Fenster states that the Commission might have been "imperfect," but was a "vast improvement over the Warren Commission's efforts, and may have been as good and effective as any independent commission can be" (p. 268). This hypothetical claim gives the sense that the Commission did what it could, given its unfortunate conditions (which mostly involve conspiracy theorists). Our ability to judge the commission's effects is limited to basing its potential (what could have happened) on its actualization (what actually happened). The reader need not believe in any grand historical CT to understand the normal operating procedures of governance that involve stacking the deck in "independent" investigations. At the very least, one needs to ask whether this commission was effective enough to merit a closure of the case, or whether another commission, not designed to fail, is warranted.

Overall, this edition of *Conspiracy Theories* is a thorough and well-researched document. Mobilizing a wide range of cultural studies theories and methods, it provides a comprehensive account of the features and stakes in the phenomenon known as conspiracy theorizing. The book has been significantly updated, both empirically and conceptually, making it more accessible and relevant.

At its best, the book situates not only CTs, but also cultural studies, as a political project. It provides a rich context for understanding the forces in contestation (consensus pundits, white supremacists, government commissions, activists), highlighting the processes of marginalization and disqualification. This version, more than the first, even highlights some salutary effects of CTs in U.S. political history (such as the nation's founding), as well as the importance of populism as a political force.

This is one side of the work's ambivalence, more pronounced here than in the first version. The other part is the desire to contain and understand CTs via their internal structures and inexorable logics. Using Žižek and a politicized psychoanalysis, this side of the work refuses to pathologize, but still uses a diagnostic model based on symptoms of psychological processes (desire, affect, drive to failure). The result is yet another mode of disqualification, albeit a more sophisticated and politically palatable one.

As cultural studies scholarship has made clear for decades, developments in social practice should drive our modes of analysis. What conceptual tools are adequate to studying these populist knowledges? Does a term like conspiracy theories get us closer to understanding politics of articulation? By filling the category with a multitude of (at times, incommensurable) tendencies, Fenster stretches the concept to its bursting point, but ultimately preserves its analytic power. The book can be seen as a last stand of the usefulness of the term. For believers, this is the most comprehensive and sophisticated analysis, one which is unlikely to be surpassed. In sum, if you still believe in conspiracy theories, this is the best book for you.

“Questions & Answers” Between Jack Bratich and Mark Fenster

JB: *Let’s begin with one of your initial definitions of conspiracy theories: “a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order, or some part thereof” (p. 1). I like this definition, because it really limits what we’re talking about. I would argue that most narratives that get called CT do not fall into this definition. Very few adhere to a notion of omnipotence, but rather a degree of potency.*

Let’s take a particular grand conspiracy account, one that focuses on the agency of secret societies in history. Even at the level of a single author (someone like Ralph Epperson or David Icke), what we find is a tale of competing groups vying for control, not a single one. And if an account makes one group (e.g., the Freemasons) central, this single group is often connected (overtly or covertly) to other groups in alliance or as a front group. And this just refers to a single narrative taken out of context: Once we begin to examine the milieu (or community, as you call it), we find more divergences than common ground. So, while your definition narrows the field greatly, the term “conspiracy theory” ends up having a broad scope throughout the book. The concept covers so many things here, which serves to give the work a richness, as well as to expose the limits of a reliance on such an all-encompassing term. The book often finds paradoxes and contradictions in its investigation (longing for closure/faced with endless interpretation; simplicity/complexity; coherence/unwieldy unraveling; marginal/ubiquitous; and individualist/collective). Rather than being a symptom inhering in the object of study, I would argue it’s a symptom of an analysis that relies on such an overabstraction. A concept that holds this many phenomena is destined to find paradoxes. Could you say more about why you still find the term useful as a descriptor?

MF: A few clarifications to begin. My use of the term “omnipotent” in the definition was not intended to suggest belief in a god-like, objective omnipotence. If I had intended to use the term that way, then much of the remainder of the book, including my use of the concepts of agency and narrative, would make little sense. A thoroughly omnipotent power produces little reason to narrate in any but the simplest way, and certainly no reason to assume that human beings can expose and resist a secretive conspiratorial power. In this sense, I’m afraid, your original suspicions were correct — I really do mean “degree of potency” — but my use of the term was intended to be descriptive in a subjective sense. To believe in conspiracy is to constitute the conspiratorial “Other” as simultaneously omnipotent-seeming and requiring resistance that can be politically successful. Such efforts may also be necessary to achieve some other goal, as in Christian eschatology, in which resistance on the material plane will bring unending salvation

on the supernatural one. That paradoxical and contradictory understanding of the conspiratorial "Other" itself drives many of the other dynamics of conspiracy theory I describe in the book.

Second, in the same way that in our earlier conversation (Fenster & Bratich, 2009) you resisted my effort to impose my book's approach to yours, I feel the need to do the reverse here. In *Conspiracy Panics*, you focus on the discursive "panics" that ensue when political rationality constitutes a belief in a conspiracy theory as an object of study; in *Conspiracy Theories*, I instead focus on conspiracy theory as a logic and rhetoric that thread their way throughout American politics, culture, and everyday life. You want to limit the concept of "conspiracy theory," partially in order to recuperate radical groups and politics that are tarnished as "paranoid" and susceptible to conspiracy theories; I want to expand our understanding of the historical phenomenon of "conspiracy theory" in order to note how widespread conspiracy theory and a broader populist understanding of power are in contemporary politics and culture. I don't think our projects are incompatible, and I think we've found common ground in these dialogues, but we approach and define "conspiracy theory" and the issues surrounding it in quite different ways.

JB: *You note that CTs are "frequently wrong — and outrageously, even pathologically, so at times" (p. 11). I agree with this statement to some extent, but doesn't trust in official narratives take on similar qualities? To wit, an adherence to the belief in Iraqi WMDs as rationale for the invasion, or believing in the official link between Hussein and Al-Qaeda as justification for the invasion, or the ignorance surrounding the Downing Street Memo. Denial, a delusional refusal to hear alternate perspectives, a faith-based adherence to experts: Aren't these characteristics that can pop up in any political account?*

MF: I absolutely agree; in fact, I think one of the 9/11 Truth Movement's most effective rhetorical moves was calling the official account a conspiracy theory — even if, as you note, it's a bit meaningless because any allegation of a criminal conspiracy is itself a conspiracy theory in a thoroughly banal way. Opposing claims regarding extraordinary, traumatic, and anomalous events like the 9/11 attacks and the JFK assassination inevitably engage in similar and parallel strategies to legitimate their own assumptions, data, and conclusions, and to delegitimize those of others. Meanwhile, both government agencies (like the 9/11 Commission) and radically dissenting groups (like the 9/11 TM) savvily employ rhetorical and public relations strategies in their efforts at public persuasion. That said, I'm hesitant to go so far as to assume that there is no way of sorting and evaluating competing claims, which I read the phrases you use prior to the colon in the last sentence as suggesting. To say that they engage in the same means of posing and supporting arguments and of criticizing opposing arguments is not to say that all political arguments, all experts, and all assumptions are equally good (or bad).

JB: *A noteworthy claim you make is that post-9/11 populist skepticism is neither new nor particularly more popular than in previous moments. I'm glad you included the rarely cited but telling statistics that almost two-thirds of the U.S. citizenry disbelieved the official account of the JFK assassination in the months following the event. I agree that populist skepticism of official accounts has a long tradition, and this opens the door for much-needed research into the history and quality of popular skepticism. I have a minor quibble with the comparison of accounts. A key difference between the JFK and the 9/11 official narratives is that the former posits no conspiracy — the lone gunman theory was the target of skepticism. The 9/11 official version already posits a conspiracy — a group of hijackers, connected to a network of*

terrorists. Popular skepticism in the JFK case was based on a belief that there was a conspiracy. In the 9/11 case, skepticism asks, "Which one?" Why wouldn't the official account (by any standard, but especially legally) be called a conspiracy theory? It seems to fit your opening definition (especially the omnipotent part). Would you consider the fairly standard leftist critique a conspiracy theory, namely that Bush & Company understood that there were no WMDs to be found in Iraq, yet deliberately told the story to the press and the public in order to justify invasion?

Moreover, you only refer to the 9/11 TM's narratives as CTs. At the same time, your description in the Afterword of a paranoid hermeneutics of suspicion seems to aptly describe the official narrative of 9/11 (Arabs, Muslims, sleeper cells, see something/say something). By using the term "conspiracy theory" to only refer to some alternative accounts, aren't you making a political selection? What is the usefulness of the term?

MF: I agree that lots of criticisms of the Bush administration from the institutional "Left" shaded into conspiracy theory. Indeed, one could certainly have a good-faith argument about whether such rhetoric was warranted as more information is disclosed about, among other things, the control of information in the lead-up to the Iraq War, Dick Cheney's role in the administration's activities, and secretive domestic surveillance and foreign assassination programs. I was never quite so certain that Karl Rove and Dick Cheney were as masterful as many feared; at the same time, there's no question that Cheney, in particular, sought to advance particular military and economic policies in secretive, manipulative ways by controlling the political agenda and the circulation of information to the public, Congress and the courts. I certainly don't argue that utilizing the narrative framework of conspiracy theory is either per se illegitimate or necessarily wrong; rather, what's interesting is to view how political actors and groups utilize that framework in particular instances — no matter where along the ideological spectrum their own commitments lie.

The argument in the Afterword concerns what I think is the unfortunate hangover from the cultural studies boom of the late 1980s and 1990s: the tendency to equate "resistance" with progressive politics and emancipation. An overbroad embrace of conspiracy theory as a logic that resists centrist political rationality must confront instances in which such logic is organized around an exclusive, essentialist conception of race (as in white supremacy) or a demonstrably false interpretation of history or politics.

It is, of course, the case that some neoconservatives and some more traditional paleo-conservatives, obsessed with Islamofascism and the like, continue to engage in precisely the same kind of paranoid fears based on essentialist notions of an Arab "mind" and "street" and Islamic beliefs and practices as those of white supremacists. But I don't see the official account or the 9/11 Commission as having been necessarily or directly implicated in that campaign. To claim that a particular Islamic sect or a particular terrorist group engaged in or supported certain violent acts in the U.S. and abroad is not the equivalent of white supremacist thought or even, necessarily, of the same beliefs as neo- or paleo-conservatives. Similarly, to view the Bush administration's extreme ratcheting-up of immigration and security programs as merely paranoid behavior against one particular group is, I think, to simplify the long history of American nativism and isolationism, as well as to misunderstand the complex and strangely

utopian vision of the Bush doctrine and its relationship with the Muslim world (which is, paradoxically, neither particularly isolationist nor nativist, as leading neo- and paleo-conservatives would surely say).

JB: *9/11 TM skeptics and other researchers liken their investigative work to court cases, sometimes in the strict legal sense, and at others, in terms of the "court of public opinion." Official narratives seem to invoke this analogy when they seek to create the final word on a matter (e.g., Gerald Posner's Case Closed). At what point is a case closed? Perhaps you are right that, for some skeptics, a case is never definitively settled (unless presumably their side wins!). But what court cases definitively end speculation and further investigations? There are appeal procedures, as well as independent follow-ups and lingering doubts. At times, technological developments (e.g., in forensics) have reopened cases long after they've been closed. Are these examples of some inexhaustible interpretive desire? If so, is it the most important or interesting component of the story?*

Moreover, while some conspiracy narratives posit closure, activists seek more investigation. In your own writing, the 9/11 Commission wanted to create the final foundational authoritative account. Is there something about these discursive actions and desires (to close or open) that should draw our attention as political analysts?

MF: The point you make here is a good one. Different epistemological regimes and social institutions apply different standards and standards of review. Indeed, the standards for criminal and civil juries are themselves quite different, and both are distinct from the less-canonical standards of proof for interpretive social sciences and humanistic inquiry, as well as from those who engage in some form of "hard" scientific inquiry that might claim some generally agreed-upon standards. Even when a standard is canonical, like the requirement that an American jury must find a criminal defendant guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt" for conviction, the standard itself is so contested and contestable — What is "reasonable"? What is a "doubt"? — that one might quite reasonably claim that each trier of fact, and then each level of appellate review, provides its own measure as to the correctness of a particular determination. The long and broad tradition of philosophy of science, including both its analytical and critical strains, obviously has much to say in this context.

Accordingly, "closure" in historical and political inquiry regarding the existence and operation of a conspiracy is, of course, contested. And, inevitably, a small or large interpretive community might disagree with a particular determination. Just as inevitably, seemingly authoritative conclusions that had previously been agreed upon by a majority of fact-finders and a majority of the population can be, and are sometimes, determined to be incorrect. This happens not only in systems of criminal and civil justice, but in history, science, and all other modes of inquiry.

But my reason for chronicling the 9/11 Commission's work was not to posit it as necessarily correct — even if, based on the information placed before the Commission and made public, I might be persuaded by its general conclusions. Rather, the issues that interest me are those that your questions suggest: How is state authority constituted, and how does it, in turn, constitute some notion of truth from a mass of facts that it collects concerning an enormously complicated, influential, and contested event? Within the state's regime of truth, which itself operates within the iron cage of Western modernity and

rationality, how is objectivity constituted? How are lines drawn between the properly investigatory and expert on the one hand and the improperly “political” and “amateur” on the other? How is authoritative expertise chosen, and how is the “improper” excluded? And how, ultimately, can the state’s authority and ability to find and constitute “truth” withstand the radical doubt of conspiracy theory? This process is far more complex than either a simply benign or simply instrumental vision of the contemporary democratic state would describe. Because of the fraught nature of this process and the inevitable contest of democratic politics, the very act of opening official investigations comes with the recognition — explicit in the case of the 9/11 Commission — that those investigations will always be a site of political, semiotic, and discursive struggle.

JB: *Focusing on internal logics of desire (à la Žižek) rather than the social arrangement of desire (à la [French philosophers] Deleuze and Guattari) depicts cultural conflict as an outcome of internally generated processes rather than one of social forces in contestation. This turn towards an internal logic, I would argue, owes its existence to a long-standing discourse on understanding deviance via explicating its inner processes. How would you characterize the difference between the traditional psychologization of politics and this Žižekian analysis? I’m not talking about their ostensible political difference either, since Žižek’s Leninism should remind us that the Soviets were on par with the U.S. regarding the pathologization of deviant thought.*

MF: I disagree that the book’s argument is limited to a discussion of conspiracy theory’s internal logics. Its relatively detailed case studies — all of which situate particular conspiracy theories within specific historical, social, and political moments — demonstrate otherwise. To be sure, my efforts to identify some of conspiracy theories’ dynamics suggest that some of the underlying narrative strategies and interpretive logics operate “across” conspiracy theories, but that is just one part of a broader project that seeks to situate those strategies and logics within the local and temporal conditions in which they play out.

JB: *In the Afterword, you make a compelling case, via Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that we should not be reflexively championing CTs because of some presumed potential political consequences. I would argue (perhaps in the same spirit) that we are always approving and affirming some narrative, even if implicitly, and that there are politics that flow from these commitments and perspectives. We need to account for those political potentials and actualities, which I want to say come from outside the narratives themselves, specifically in the conditions of possibility for dissent.*

The subsequent questions would be: What has an attachment to the official 9/11 narrative wrought? What would be equivalent for 9/11TM? For instance, “conspiracy theorists” in academe have been targeted by the U.S. Right and have, as you note, resulted in dismissals. Shouldn’t this be a compelling reason to not only protect minority thinking, but also to understand the myriad ways dissent is delegitimized, including via our own cherished political perspectives?

More specifically, regarding the 9/11 Commission Report: One result of this incompetence theory regarding 9/11 has been the call for, acceptance of, and implementation of a more integrated State, one in which subject-citizens have been recruited to be the State’s eyes and ears. This institutional explanation

(so often cited by the left to dismiss CTs) is used to enhance State power. In other words, there are no necessary political effects that emerge from institutional explanations. In the State's narrative about itself regarding the 9/11 case, "failure" leads to restructuring, the goal of which is a stronger State. Isn't this enough to warrant not only skepticism, but also our political intervention via research?

MF: Yes, political consequences matter, and to the extent that a particular explanation is likely to have such consequences — for example, the potential that it could lead to the persecution of a particular population — the State has an obligation to stop or remediate those consequences. I'm more skeptical of what I see as the second step embedded in your question: I don't see why an explanation's consequences must necessarily require the suppression, rejection, or alteration of a plausible conclusion by "political research." This is not to deny the importance of any such research, but I'm unclear what specifically constitutes "political" research, and what its relationship is to, say, historical research that will, by its nature, consider an event from a particular political perspective.

With respect to the 9/11 Commission, as I state in the book, I am unpersuaded by claims of their collusion with the Bush administration in some grand cover-up. There are plenty of grounds for criticizing the Commission, and as I try to show in the book's chapter and a separate article I've written (Fenster, 2008), that the Commission was inevitably part of a broader social, bureaucratic, and ideological network of political and legal professionals tied to the state apparatus. I suppose that if you are viewing its work from both a quite high level of theoretical abstraction and a radical critique of the State, then, sure, the 9/11 Commission could be seen as purposively advancing the imperial American State, serving as an instrument of global political control, and promoting expanded invasions of privacy and the surveillance and stifling of political dissenters. That is, if you view the Commission simply as an instrument of the State, and if you view the State as a coherent, cohesive entity that can be controlled from a central position of power within the presidency, then your concern about the Commission's willingness to tailor its investigation to assist the Bush administration's efforts both to impose a Pax Americana on the world and a surveillance state within its borders would make sense. You would then view my efforts to complicate the Commission's work, and to see the semiotic and political struggle over its legitimacy, as entirely beside the point. I would argue that my efforts offer a more accurate account of the political and bureaucratic morass in which state actors often find themselves when attempting to respond to populist suspicions of their activities, but if you don't share my theoretical and political commitments and my descriptive focus, then you would disagree.

JB: *You end Chapter 7 with a close reading of Loose Change, a key filmic text for the early growth of the 9/11 Truth Movement. It is an interesting counterpart to your close reading of the 9/11 Commission's rhetoric (and, somewhat, the report). One key difference emerges in your concluding analysis of each. For the 9/11 Commission, the conclusion is an affirmation of the Commission's efforts in the face of both the limitations it faced, and how its task was almost fated to fail due to conspiracy theory's inexorable logic that would make it the new Warren Commission. However, Loose Change gets no similar sympathetic reading. Instead, Loose Change is understood as a kind of interpellation: hailing the viewer-subject who now finds meaning where there was emptiness. The fact that this analysis concludes the entire chapter is even more significant. Don't you think the 9/11 Commission could also be assessed for its comforting*

function, for creating a prophylactic against the spread of CT into the population, and for fostering trauma-recovery by a new, bolstered State?

MF: What's interesting about the Commission's "comforting function," as you characterize it, is that it utterly fails to comfort the makers of *Loose Change* and others who challenge the Commission's work. The book describes how the Commission Report's use of narrative, especially in the opening chapter, and the conditions of its publication, sought to make the book relevant and readable for general readers. So to an extent, I think you're right that the 9/11 Commission's project was part of a larger ideological project of the state apparatus; the book focuses on what I described above as the Commission's struggle to get public attention and gain legitimacy for its investigation.

At the same time, I'm not certain if "comforting" is the term I would use for the Commission's work, unless you assume that the correct alternative to the Commission's theory of widespread incompetence and anomalous success is the theory that an organized conspiracy from within the American state perpetrated the attacks. That is, if you're suggesting that the Commission lied in its investigation and was itself a tool of a broader conspiracy — which is certainly the claim made by *Loose Change* and David Ray Griffin, as leading representatives of the 9/11 TM — then I'm not quite certain what you mean by "comforting." A key part of the Truth Movement's claims, which you invoked earlier, is that the Commission invited the state's vast expansion precisely by making the American public *uncomfortable* about its vulnerability to a largely illusory terrorist threat.

JB: *The relationship between secrecy and power (your subtitle) seems even more public today than it was during the 1990s. You argue that secrecy engenders some powerful fantasies and plays a significant cultural role. You note that CTs long for a completely transparent, accessible democracy. Is this different from non-pathologized political narratives? Isn't a progressive left project also devoted to this utopian ideal? Also, is it the case that minimizing secrecy leads to utopic belief in pure transparency?*

MF: I entirely agree. In fact, my next project addresses that issue directly. "Transparency" is largely an empty signifier that drives theory, politics, and policy to dead-end from which they need rescue (an earlier version of this new work appears as Fenster, 2006).

JB: *It seems like popular skepticism and the concern over conspiracy accounts are linked to U.S. Presidential administrations. Your book came out near the end of Clinton's second term, and this version has been released at the tail end of Bush's regime. Any speculation about the Obama era, either about populist skepticism or the state management of dissent?*

MF: It's fairly easy to find continuity between the Obama administration's first year and the widespread proliferation of conspiracies that arose during previous presidencies. Throughout the campaign and in the first months of his presidency, Obama has faced allegations that began in the far reaches of the right wing and among some Hillary Clinton supporters about his religion, his birth certificate, his alleged desire to foment a socialist republic, and his ties to "radical" political and racial operatives. Bill Clinton tended both to respond to the allegations that swirled around them and to ignore them. George W. Bush's administration seemed entirely to ignore them — for example, by resisting the formation of an

independent 9/11 Commission, and by frequently using legal and political means to keep information secret.

I could see Obama trying to use the birth certificate controversy to his advantage, as a means to tie his opposition to its extremist base in the same way that he used Rush Limbaugh to criticize the Republican Party in the early months of 2009. In this sense, Obama would be creating a “conspiracy panic” around the far right wing in order to tarnish conservatism and the G.O.P. with the taint of paranoia and dysfunction. A number of these theories are demonstrably false — the Obamas seem to fall within the range of secular liberalism of most members of their class and educational backgrounds, while the birth certificate allegations appear at this time to be wholly fabricated. So, to turn the tables back to your book, I wonder whether you would either agree that such a panic requires the same critique that you made of the center and the institutional left about panics surrounding HIV/AIDS and 9/11-related conspiracies in *Conspiracy Panics*, or if you think there is some distinction between those latter theories and the burgeoning ones surrounding the Obamas. In other words, how would you feel if Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin and the folks on various movement-conservative Web sites began to cite your book for the proposition that efforts to squelch consideration of *their* allegations inscribe a political rationality that seeks to exclude radical dissent?

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