

**“Conspiracy Theory” and Sound Argumentation:  
The Method of *Cocaine Politics* for resolving “Conflicting World Views”**

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Abstract:

Research from Richard Hofstadter and, more recently, Mark Fenster emphasizes the volatility of the terms “conspiracy” and “conspiracy theory.” Despite the conflicting semantic reactions caused by manipulative uses of “conspiracy,” the concept of a group of people working in a clandestine fashion for an unlawful purpose still needs to be judiciously debated. Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall’s *Cocaine Politics*, this paper will argue, models possible strategies for discussing “conspiracies” and “conspiracy theories” in a meaningful way.

Introduction:

Recent work in communication and cultural studies has shown that, more than most other terms, the concept of “conspiracy”—a group of people acting in secrecy for an unlawful purpose—has become layered with so many emotional connotations that the term is more volatile than meaningful. In fact, “conspiracy” is more frequently elevated from a noun to a more abstract concept in the phrase “conspiracy theory.” Every conspiracy theory—from the ascent of Richard III to the English throne to the alleged connections between the Bush-Bin Ladin family—has its vociferous adherents and detractors. To express these tensions in Alfred Korzybski’s language, “conspiracy theory” is a term that generates a wide range of differing and conflicting semantic reactions.

Mark Fenster’s *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* both moves forward scholarly examination of the contested term “conspiracy theory” and suggests an excellent area to examine the conference’s theme of Confronting the Challenges of Conflicting World Views. It is the plan of this paper to (1) review the work of Fenster’s acknowledged predecessor, Richard Hofstadter, on the notion of “conspiracy” in American politics, then to (2) review Fenster’s additions to Hofstadter’s critique of the term “conspiracy theory,” thus emphasizing how the term continues to be a source of conflicting world views, and finally to (3) suggest preliminary strategies for cogently and meaningfully debating a given conspiracy theory by examining Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall’s model text *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies and the CIA in Central America*.

Hofstadter’s “pathology” of “conspiracy theory”

Hofstadter is credited by Fenster and others for beginning ground-breaking work on the concept of conspiracy theory with his 1963 Oxford lecture that was later published in *Harper’s* under the title “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” With this essay, Hofstadter commented on two aspects of conspiracy theory that are with us today--the tremendous scope of such conspiracy theories and the self-righteous attitudes of those who believe and oppose such conspiracies.

First, more than a group executing secretive and criminal behavior, conspiracies are seen by the theorist as a force in shaping history. To establish this meaning of conspiracy, Hofstadter examines conspiracies of the 18th and 19th centuries in American political discourse and finds that he can use “political rhetoric to get at political pathology” (6). This “pathology” is shown in conspiracies attributed to Illuminati, Freemasons, Catholics and then Jews. In each case, Hofstadter finds that, rather than building clear evidence in support of a given theory, the theory itself is used as evidence in support of particular political parties that espouse “American values” or “American liberty” (19). In the political situation created by the conspiracy theory, these vague positive values are held up against the specific but unsupported accusations of evil and conspiracy, thus creating the fallacy of the undistributed middle (a.k.a.: the false dichotomy)—a non-existent middle-ground between political extremes. The pattern for this development, Hofstadter says, arises from a “folk movement of considerable power.” Such “movement” against this conspiratorial network of, say, Freemasons gained “the support of several reputable statesmen who had only mild sympathy with its fundamental basis, but who as politicians could not afford to ignore it” (15). Here Hofstadter has identified a case in which “rulers,” as Korzybski predicted, are “those who are engaged in the manipulation of symbols” (77).

The second element that balances the evil of the conspiracy is the hero who recognizes and warns of global manipulation by the conspiratorial network. Such a hero would be “a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public. The paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician” (30). This hero’s “demand for unqualified victories leads to the formulation of hopelessly demanding and unrealistic goals” (31).

Hofstadter’s analysis presents a prime example of the conference theme, “conflicting world views,” for the extreme adherence to the belief of the evil conspiracy creates its opposite: the extremely virtuous and moral anti-conspirator. Summarizing this polarizing view--what he calls “the paranoid style”--Hofstadter writes,

History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give and take, but an all-out crusade. The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. (29)

The polarizing effect, which above Hofstadter describes as “demonic forces” opposed to an “all-out crusade,” continue today but layered with the irony typical of our culture.

#### Fenster’s “popular culture” of “conspiracy theory”

Fenster’s *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* further examines the social significance of the term “conspiracy theory.” Fenster builds his work directly upon Hofstadter’s, acknowledging its “influence [and] the stress he places on the rituals and symbols of popular political practice” (10).

Fenster then updates Hofstadter’s case for “conspiracy theory” as a step to easily demonize the  
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political opposition and to establish a crusade for the “theorist,” partly by adding a number of new conspiracies to Hofstadter’s list: advocates for the militia movement, critics of George Bush’s New World Order, and even Hillary Clinton’s charge of a “vast right-wing conspiracy.” Like Hofstadter, Fenster finds that although evidence for the conspiracies is lacking or questionable, the conspiracies themselves are “firm conclusions” that can then be used as a leverage in political discourse (79).

Diverging from Hofstadter, Fenster observes that conspiracy theories take on a greater complexity than the “binary opposition” observed in “The Paranoid Style” (14). Additionally, Fenster finds an explanation for the continuing popularity of conspiracy theories within the nature of such theories themselves.

One chapter in *Conspiracy Theories*, “The Clinton Chronicles: Conspiracy Theory as Interpretation” posits that, by their very nature, conspiracies are unending; there is always more to be known about a suspected plot, another link to uncover. As each new link is uncovered (or invented) the old theory must be modified to fit the leaked information. Fenster writes: “Conspiracy theory is a productive signifying system, like capital, identifying new and depleting old resources...destroying and building new signs and chains in an endless process of interpretation” (97). Thus, where Hofstadter documented a historical trend in American political discourse, Fenster offers a causal rationale for the unending debate over conspiratorial question-marks, like the JFK assassination. This causal process of generating deeper conflicts from an initial conspiracy theory is an instance of a well-recognized problem in General Semantics. Specifically, the active “mind” makes its own evidence regardless of whether such evidence can be perceived with the “senses” (Korzybski 186).

In the final sections, Fenster adds an ironic layer onto the convoluted meaning of “conspiracy theory” by examining what he has termed the “playful” use of conspiracies. In particular, Fenster is interested in the satire that accretes around popular concepts in the post-modern world. Conspiratorial role-playing games or novels like Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* or Robert Anton Wilson’s *Illuminatus* trilogy--a series of books with a plot so complex and widespread that most readers will immediately see it as a hyperfabrication of a vast conspiracy—are discussed as the latest popular use of conspiracy theories in American culture. While Fenster recognizes the value of such games and artifacts for advancing cultural and interpersonal discourse, he finds these playful uses ultimately unsatisfying since they “often” constitute a “cynical abandonment of profound political realities that merely reaffirms the dominant political order” (219).

Finally, Fenster’s “cultural approach” to popular understanding of conspiracy theories in the United States complicates the problems diagnosed by Hofstadter and—as he acknowledges—leaves us somewhat disarmed should a genuine conspiracy, that is a group of people acting in a clandestine and unlawful manner, happen along (221). Although the stated purpose of the book is to amplify the cultural significance of the contested term “conspiracy,” the reader can sense elsewhere in the book this need for a strategy to investigate and communicate credible information about real conspiracies. One such case occurs when Fenster, discussing theories surrounding the assassination of JFK, refers to New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s investigation as a “shaggy dog story” (105). To those sympathetic with Garrison’s suspicion that the Justice Department and the CIA were behind the assassination, this characterization seems

unfair. To those unsympathetic to Garrison's view but similarly unimpressed by the findings of the Warren Commission, it is yet another call for continuing investigation into the assassination of the US president.

In the case of the JFK assassination, the existence of any conspiracy is set off against the Warren Commission's lone-gunman/Lee Harvey Oswald explanation. As contentious as the term "conspiracy" has become, this important historical crime underscores the need to judge conspiracies by more objective standards of argumentation, to essentially look for the "third factor" through which two disputants can find agreement (Korzybski 82). In short, the playful "conspiracy theory" of popular culture emphasizes the need to distinguish those fanciful, trendy—and sometimes paranoid—conspiracies from the "conspiracy theory" that can be argued with a high level of probability.

### Scott and Marshall's Institutional Research without "Conspiracy"

While the uses of "conspiracy theory" in popular culture are finally dissatisfying or destructive, it would seem that "real investigation" into potential conspiracies could continue with the application of sound argumentation skills. Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall have done just that with their intricate book *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America*. This text is a model of sound reasoning strategies and, in a course on argumentation, many of these strategies (such as its careful attention to providing a balance of witnesses explicitly for or against the thesis of the text or its willingness to eliminate sources whose credibility could not be reliably established or its careful documentation of all sources in 60 pages of notes--fully 25% of the text) would deserve further study. For purposes of this paper, however, I want to focus on two particular strategies that may provide some remedy for these conflicting views and allow useful debate over a "conspiracy theory."

First, Scott and Marshall have avoided using the term "conspiracy," except where they join the popular trend to dissociate their own work from such fanciful "conspiracy peddlers" (7). Although the thesis of their book regards a large network of people working toward increasing power and wealth through secretive and illegal means--in short, a conspiracy--they have specifically avoided that term. A conspiracy carries, as we have seen with Fenster and Hofstadter, the connotation that all members of the secretive group are working in a deliberate fashion to shape world history. Nevertheless, the story of the CIA's involvement in Latin American drug wars does not clearly show a conscious *telos* toward a specific goal of world domination. Instead the path was more one of habitual engagement with unsavory elements (drug runners and the like) over the decades of US involvement in Central America. Hence, the authors have noted, by way of their introductory and concluding chapters, that there is an "institutional direction" (5), a "long-standing pattern of intelligence alliances" (187), or a "cocaine-military symbiosis" (191). In the body of this work, Scott and Marshall use other descriptors for these criminal connections: "covert operations," "political intrigues" (19), "milieu of mercenaries, drug smugglers, arms salesman, and agents" (78), "Networks, Syndicates, and Cartels" (79), "the [Oliver] North secret power network," and "the Administration's covert drug alliances in Central America" (164). While such terms are at a level of abstraction similar to "conspiracy," these terms avoid the destructive semantic reactions that "conspiracy"—as shown by Fenster and Hofstadter—engenders.

In further corroboration that these lexical choices are deliberate, when Scott and Marshall do use the term “conspiracy,” it is not used to describe the criminal behavior that they are documenting, but rather attempts to smear legitimate investigations. Thus, we read that an investigation of one of the drug smugglers is “mired in conspiratorial subplots” (133) and a crucial whistleblower is accused of being a “co-conspirator” (145). One exception to this rule appears, but it is striking that a book of this length, detailing such extensive secret collusion and criminal behavior, is practically devoid of “conspiracy” in its traditional sense.<sup>1</sup>

Complementing their careful control of the term “conspiracy,” the authors have avoided the personal accusations that come from claims of conspiracy. Instead they have focused the need for reform on the institutions and systems rather than particular people (Though following through on such reforms would probably lead to some personal punishments being meted out). Criticism of impersonal institutions or systems is much less likely to result in the polarized debates that “conspiracy theories” have so often created.

Second, Scott and Marshall have used the rhetorical strategy of allowing their readers to draw their own conclusions through a surfeit of evidence. Unlike the conspiracy theories discussed in Hofstadter and Fenster, *Cocaine Politics* does not favor firm conclusions over evidence. Instead, the text barely states its thesis, except in the institutional terms described above. However, once the reader has waded through the dense text, the thesis of the book is inescapable and shocking: While the US government was declaring a “drug war” against Columbia’s Medellin cocaine cartel, certain elements within the government were supporting and encouraging illegal trade with the Medellin cartel’s chief competitor, the Cali cocaine cartel. Of course, the Cali cartel was further aided by the war that had been declared against the Medellin competition. Seeing the thesis--or at least a paraphrase of the thesis spelled out--one can understand why it is not presented in the opening pages of *Cocaine Politics*. It is as though readers have to “earn” this thesis by accepting so much documented evidence. Concluding their chapter “The Cali Connection in the United States,” the authors are careful to retain this tone in which evidence speaks for itself: “Was the CIA in the 1980s still in alliance with the right wing political elements of the International Connection’s politics of cocaine in Central America? This impression is certainly corroborated by the evidence of CIA involvement in Contra drug connections” (103).

In sum, the effect of the book is to give the reader a great amount of evidence point by point, and to resist emphasizing the broader conclusions. Even though such extensive evidence is complex, it is also much less abstract and inflammatory to much of the public. Scott and Marshall’s text is testimony to the advice of the general semantacist to steer away from language that would too easily stir heated passions.<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion:

The problems raised by Hofstadter and Fenster represent archetypal examples of the “Conflicting World Views” of this conference. Such “conspiracy theories,” I hope to have shown, are strongly resistant to compromise, carrying, as they do, a history of virulent semantic reactions. Worse, as Fenster has argued, the conspiratorial view is guaranteed to be unending, continually generating adherents who conduct themselves self-righteously. In this, we see the trend of accepting evidence of conspiracies in our “minds” rather than through our “senses.” Difficulties

with this term in popular culture would be merely academic if there were not such things as conspiracies, but conspiracies in which groups have secretly coalesced to grab power through force have been a constant in history. There is no reason to suspect the case is any less true today.

With their emphasis on strategies of sound argumentation, Scott and Marshall provide an antidote that allows calm research on conspiratorial behavior. More could be done toward establishing argumentative standards for conspiracy theories, such as attempting to describe the “field” of argumentation (in the sense Stephen Toulmin uses the term). However, even Scott and Marshall’s carefully researched methods—I must acknowledge—raise problems with the popular misconceptions about “conspiracies.” *Cocaine Politics* is so careful with the balance, documentation, and presentation of evidence, that it is dense and difficult reading. It may never reach the level of the “folk” who are already polarized over a number of contemporary “conspiracy theories.”

#### Sources:

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<sup>1</sup> The exception: “Guglielminetti...organized former military intelligence and Argentine Anticommunist Alliance death squad veterans into an anti-government conspiracy” (50).

<sup>2</sup> Such an inflammatory claim might be “Dan Quayle appears to be a co-conspirator in the drugs for weapons deals; hence, Quayle’s strange popularity—despite all the jokes regarding his competence—with the Bush administration.” Such a claim is never made in the text, yet on pages 113 and following there is sufficient evidence given that such an inflammatory conclusion may be reasonably drawn.