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CONSPIRACY THEORY AS THERAPY IN PHILIP ROTH'S "THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA"?

MICHAŁ RÓŻYCKI
Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

By focusing on a passage in Philip Roth's book, this paper strives to outline how conspiratorial beliefs can have a therapeutic function for the community which has experienced a traumatic event. Fictitious groups depicted in such texts serve as the ultimate causes of humanity's misgivings: from natural disasters and diseases that plague it to the inherent flaws of political and social systems. Such beliefs, however, are likely to become as dangerous as the cure, a threat Roth hints at in his work. The second part of the paper will look at the viability of conspiracism as a means to address traumatizing issues, in the context of the postmodern condition and the diffusion of motifs until recently present only in the radical texts of popular culture.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, trauma, Philip Roth, Alternate History.

1. Introduction—Can It Happen?

The last decade of the 20th century and, even more so, the first decade of the 21st century saw a tendency to depict conspiracy theories in a more positive light. It would seem that the stronger the official voice is in condemning them, the more ubiquitous and accepted they become. Beliefs of radicals became the staple of popular movies and cartoons, while scholars, so far understandably critical of conspiracism, began to recognize that such reactions, however flawed, are symptomatic of a wider problem and have their place in a democratic society, as described below. Thus, for the traumatized post-9/11 society conspiratorial musings became a way to channel grief: "good" and therapeutic, though not in the sense of a balm. They were, rather, a necessary, invasive, last-resort surgery that could ultimately cause more ill than good, but whose intention is to cure.

This attitude is strongly condemned in Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*. Its diverse and, at times, controversial narrative relies on a minutely-outlined conspiracy theory that is presented in a thoroughly

negative light. Effectively a conspiratorial interpretation of the novel's plot, and of its influence is presented as marginal, as an excuse that can only silence a guilty conscience, quite possibly leading to madness. Moreover, the book's protagonists reject the theory without giving it any consideration, uninterested in the supposed solace it might bring. By putting together these two elements, the cultural trend and this specific work of fiction, we will subsequently attempt to answer the following question: Can conspiracy theories be beneficial, and if so, to what extent? More importantly, however, it will also scrutinize the extent to which the answer to that question is shaped by the circumstances in which it is asked. First, an outline of the relevant scene in *The Plot Against America* will be provided, followed by an outline of the recent academic scholarship regarding conspiracy theories *per se*. Having laid the groundwork, the final section of the paper will attempt to tackle the notion of both the validity of the conspiracy theory as therapy, as well as the historical contexts in which such a question can be asked.

2. A Plot in *The Plot...*

When it comes to genre, *The Plot Against America* could be categorized as an alternative history novel; that, however, would be too simplistic a categorization. A reader looking for "what if?" scenarios would be in fact rather disappointed, even though the book's pages are populated by real-life characters and organizations. Roth's book explores an alternative history scenario through the eyes of his own alter ego, also named Philip. The novel's plot hinges on the idea that the 1940 presidential elections were won by Charles A. Lindbergh, the famous aviator, depicted within the novel as an isolationist and Nazi sympathizer. Not only does his administration sign a non-aggression pact with both Germany and Japan, but it also starts to slowly introduce "naturalization" policies aimed at American Jews, the purpose of the legislations being to relocate the Semites and transform them into White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. Philip's family, the Roths, are directly affected by those policies. His brother Sandy is sent to work over the summer holidays at a farm in the Midwest. While there, he not only adopts his host's way of life, but sees it as something to aspire to. Philip's father, on the other hand, loses his job after refusing to submit to the policies. The climactic point of the novel comes when the president inexplicably vanishes while flying from state to state to ease surfacing discontents. An assassination plot is implied and a state of emergency declared, leading to riots directed against the Jews, for it was they, along with FDR sympathizers, on whom the president's likely death is blamed. Peace is eventually restored, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumes presidency after Lindbergh's vice-president, Burton K. Wheeler, is impeached.

The idea that the United States could lose to the Axis, or become enamoured of fascism, is by no means new. Any fictitious scenario that depicts a victorious Third Reich requires a compliant, or at least passive, United States. Two of the most notable examples in this direction are Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, written in 1935, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). The former describes, in a satirical tone, the rise to power of one Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip who, after a populist campaign, secures the presidency and begins to abolish all democratic institutions, including the Congress, and changes the Constitution to make himself a dictator. In spite of all these, however, most of the citizens support Windrip, convinced that fascism cannot take root in America. In Dick's novel, on the other hand, the assassination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt destabilizes the U.S., which are then conquered by the Third Reich and Japan Despite the loss, many of the country's citizens adopt the Nazi ideology and support the racial purges conducted in the once-multicultural America. As Gavriel Rosenfeld argued, such novels not only seem to use such speculation to comment on a current socio-political situation, but also enforce a view of history that is guided by chance and influenced by random events (8, 10).

Rather than present a vision of military dominance, Roth, similarly to Lewis, paints a bleak image of a nation that has subverted itself. Seeds of Nazism and institutionalized anti-Semitism, he seems to argue, lie within the American society and certain circumstances may trigger their growth. Hitler's ideology provided only the motivation, but the resulting alternate history course was selected by the Americans themselves. As the *Washington Post*'s review argued:

> When Philip's mother, Bess, urges Herman to take the family to Canada, he shouts: "I am not running away! . . . This is our country" She sadly replies, "No, not anymore. It's Lindbergh's. It's the goyim's." But the whole brunt of the novel is that he is right and she is wrong, however difficult and dispiriting may be the task of sustaining it. (Yardley)

It is precisely this bleak vision that Bess Roth paints. However, it is challenged by the end of the novel by what can easily be called a conspiracy theory, which states that the fault lies in outside influence and not in some inherent flaw within the American society. Soon after "Lindy's" presidential victory a number of Jews flocked to him to form an "Office of American Absorption". Among them was young Philip's aunt, Evelyn, who becomes the companion of rabbi Bengelsdorf , the official representative of the Jewish community for the Lindbergh administration. After the president's disappearance, the rabbi is arrested, and at the end of the war he writes a 550 page long "memoir" entitled *My Life Under Lindbergh*, which "remained at the

top of the American bestseller lists", and the theories presented therein became the topics of discussion for the decades to come (Roth 326-27).

Bengelsdorf's book outlines a conspiratorial interpretation of Lindbergh's presidency, which, the rabi claims, was confided to him by the president's wife: "Mrs. Lindbergh … traced everything to the 1932 kidnapping of her infant son Charles … by the Nazi's shortly before Hitler came to power" (Roth 321). The child, officially believed to have been killed by the kidnapper, was used to blackmail the Lindberghs. Their subsequent political career was allegedly orchestrated by the Nazi Party officials, who deemed that they should "take up the cause of America First", a real-life isolationist, anti-war organization. Lindbergh's presidential campaign was effectively run by Berlin, as the future president received "detailed instructions ... where and when speeches were to be delivered, even the type of apparel to be donned for each public appearance"; even the nomination acceptance speech was supposedly written by Josef Goebbels (Roth 323). The relocation of Jewish citizens was done on the directive of Heinrich Himmler, but the tardiness of the president in enforcing it led to his eventual assassination (Roth 325). Mrs. Lindbergh was ordered by Berlin to leave the White House and remove herself from public life, lest her son be sent to find certain death on the Western Front, a claim that stifled any chance for the verification of the story.

Writing in hindsight, the book's narrator calls the rabbi's tales "the most elaborate story, the most unbelievable story—though not necessarily the least convincing" (Roth 321). At the time, however, Aunt Evelyn's story was fully rejected by the Roths, even though it implies that all can come back to normal. When she comes to their house claiming that she will be tortured because she learned "the truth", her sister rejects her, and tells Philip that his "aunt is not our concern anymore" (Roth 339). He soon finds her, however, hidden near their house, and asserts that:

> The shadow of her madness had crept over me without my as yet understanding that while hiding in our storage bin … she had indeed lost her mind. … She'd abandoned herself to the same credulity that had transformed the entire country into a madhouse: the worship of Lindbergh and his conception of the world (Roth 351-52).

It is probably not so much the conspiracy theory that drives Evelyn to madness, as "the shock of witnessing rabbi Bengelsdorf's arrest" (Roth 326), but it is noteworthy that the theory, parts of which she was bound to know before the publications of the rabbi's memoirs, did not alleviate the trauma in any way. The reason why it did not happen will be the subsequently examined. Thus, the following section will not only provide a delineation of the term "conspiracy theory" but will also outline the allegedly positive psychological impact of the conspiracy theories in general.

3. Deciphering a Conspiracy

The definition of a conspiracy theory is problematic, mostly due to the controversies that are inherently connected with such narratives. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as:

> *n.* the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; *spec.* a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event.

This rather dry definition strives to be as objective as possible, and in doing so misses some of the connotations, primarily negative, the term usually elicits. Indeed, most popular definitions would be comparative, based on the qualities of a theory that has been popularly acknowledged, or rather branded, as a conspiracy theory. Among such theories one might find the claims that the Moon Landing did not take place, the dozens of theories concerning the assassination of president John F. Kennedy, or the suggestions that the U.S. government allowed the 9/11 terrorist attacks to happen. Divergences from the official accounts of these events are usually seen as incorrect "by definition", though as we shall see later, that is not always the case. The rejection of a conspiracy theory is not necessarily based on its falsity, but rather on the implications of what it would mean to fully embrace such belief. As Michel Foucault claimed, something may be considered "true" and "false" not necessarily on objective grounds "but because it is not clear what it would amount to for them to be either true or false" (qtd. in Rouse 97). That is to say, one is likely to reject the claims that the Moon Landing never took place not because of evidence to the contrary, but because to believe it would mean that thousands of NASA employees, government officials, as well as journalists all around the world were in a conspiracy to lie to the public; "such a system cannot be controlled because there are simply too many agents to be handled by a small controlling group" (Keeley 124). It is the fact that all supposed conspirators still hold their tongues about the truth, and the improbability that such a media scam is even possible to coordinate, that leads to the failure of the theory, and not any objective proof.

An expansion of the definition could claim, therefore, that a conspiracy theory is "a proposal about a conspiracy that may or may not be true; it has not been yet proven", while a wider "tendency to see conspiracies everywhere" could be called "conspiracism", with neither of the above exclusive only to radical political groups (Olmsted 3). This definition is only slightly more inclusive than the OED one, and does not account for the changes the meaning of the term went through since the creation of the U.S. To avoid digressions,

however, this text will mention them only when it is relevant to the discussion. Another element connected to conspiracy theories draws the attention of the analysts, namely, why they persist, especially in the light of their condemnation by the public at large. The answer is tied to the analysis of what they have to offer to their potential believers. Their strongest allure lies in the fact that they provide a "unified explanation", one in which all the possible elements are accounted for; "conspiracy theories *always* explain more than competing theories, because, by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain *both* the data of the received account *and* the errant data that the received theory fails to explain" (Keeley 119). Second, they provide a clear-cut enemy to be hated or blamed, a "model of malice", which is both the source of the problem, as well as the sole acting agent; this enemy is one that cannot be reasoned with and his potential victory would be irrevocable, thus only his total elimination will suffice (Hofstadter 31). Such moral panic, Peter Knight observes, is usually created by the majority and directed at the minority, one that can easily be made a scapegoat ("Making Sense" 20). Finally, the belief in an all-powerful conspiracy gives its believers a promise of agency. As Brian L. Keeley claims, conspiracy theorists are "some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are capable of being controlled" (123). Thus, even if there are some agents that control the events, the very fact that chance is not the reason behind them makes the world "meaningful rather than arbitrary" (Barkun 4).

4. Therapy or Trauma?

Roth's book depicts a society that faces what Jeffrey C. Alexander calls a "cultural trauma," a situation that "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon the group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). The adoption of conspiracism can greatly alleviate the trauma, and this is implied by the popularity of conspiracy theories after a traumatic event. First, as mentioned above, it can add profound meaning even to trivial, chance events. Furthermore, as John F. Kennedy Jr. claimed, "it can be comforting, when one is blindsided by a pitiless 'act of God', to assign responsibility to those made of flesh and blood" (18). Finally, it tackles the problem or morality and guilt. On the one hand, it reasserts the belief in human agency behind events and "presumes a world of autonomous, freely acting individuals … who thereby can be held morally responsible for what happens" (Wood, 409). On the other hand, the panicked moralists move the blame away from the scapegoating group to a surrogate one, absolving the society that claims to have become

unwilling pawns of the conspiracy. It should be clear, of course, that it is a potentially destructive interpretation of reality, and countless examples might be given of the atrocities committed through attacks on victimized minorities. Suffice it to say that it was an anti-federal government conspiracy theory which motivated Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 (Barkun ix).

Rabbi Bengelsdorf's theory, depicted in Roth's novel, had all the above-mentioned hallmarks of the therapeutic attractiveness of conspiracy theories, as well as their inherent flaws. His version accounted for all the minute details, vaguely railroading unrelated events into an *exposé* of a conspiracy theory: from the controversial death of the Lindbergh baby, to the couple's retreat to Europe, their sudden support of the America First organization, even the medal "Lindy" received from Hermann Goering. Furthermore, the rabbi's account underlines the outside origin of the evil, suggesting anti-Semitic sentiments were nonexistent until Lindbergh became corrupted by the Nazis. The blame was neither of the system nor of the society that allowed for a spike in anti-Semitism, but of an un-American enemy. In this light, both the "official" conspiracy theory of vice-president Wheeler, who blamed an FDR-Jewish conspiracy, and that of aunt Evelyn merely point to a cuplrit to be blamed, but do not address the issue itself. Finally, Bergdorf's theory depicted in his memoirs, entitled *My Life Under Lindbergh*, gave meaning to the seemingly random death of the president, as well as to that of his child years before. Lindbergh's death in a plane crash over a desert was not a random fluke of weather, but an assassination carried out by the Third Reich, a human agency. Yet even this projection of guilt onto what seems an objective "villain" hides the true perpetrator.

One might ask what a fictitious conspiracy theory about events that never took place can tell us about "real" conspiracy theories. The answer lies in the fact that rabbi Bengelsdorf's theory, as presented within the scope of the novel, is plausible to the reader. Since Roth's text describes a "what-if" history scenario, were he to present the claims of *My Life Under Lindbergh* as potentially true, the readers would accept it. The lapse of the narrator into what Richard Hofstadter called "the paranoid style" could become believable and would expose yet another American vice, one that has resurfaced throughout the nation's history. However, *The Plot...* unequivocally presents the theory as false. The reason for that lies not in the validity of the claim itself, which is in line with the ideas of political radicals, but in the thesis of Roth's book. Its visceral presentation of the slow rise of anti-Semitism in American society, from open contempt to relocation schemes and lynching, highlights a fault inherent within the slowly deteriorating Wasp-dominated society. The conspiracy theory, were it to be fully embraced by the text, would invalidate this claim, and remove the blame from the American people. That would run

counter to what Roth is striving to show. By invalidating it, Roth presents rabbi Bengelsdorf's theory as a futile attempt to salvage the status quo from which he benefited. Furthermore, its curative function is invalidated by aunt Evelyn's madness, mentioned only because of her relation to the narrator's family. The theory's relevance and its ability to provide closure to the seemingly traumatized society are rejected in the novel by a statement of the Lindbergh family calling the rabbi's book a "reprehensible calumny, with no basis in fact, motivated by vengeance and greed, sustained by egomaniacal delusion, invented for the sake of crass commercial exploitation" (Roth 326). In fact, the Lindbergh's words could function as an official refutation of any contemporary conspiracy theory but, such rejections less visible at the turn of the 21st century. Instead of being so easily and unequivocally rejected by our contemporary world, conspiracism is a matter of heated controversy that reveals its popularity. In this light, the final section of the paper will be devoted to the academic approaches to conspiracy theories, and it will try to point out why Roth's book seems to run counter to them.

5. Can We Love the Conspiracy?

The analysis of the role of conspiracy theories in *The Plot...* leads to a perverse question: If Roth's depiction of a conspiracy theory is so heavily influenced by the thesis of his book, does a similar process occur in academic discussions? The latter became especially pronounced after the Bush administration's reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, that is the jingoistic tone that accompanied the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the hostility towards dissenting voices and anti-war protests. That is to say, are texts describing the theories around this event influenced by political discussions? Of course, the aim of such texts is not to attack a political party, but to indicate a social phenomenon that does so. The very object of Katherine Olmsted's book *Real Enemies* was to demonstrate how, since the First World War, the American government's slow turn to secrecy, the employment of "official" conspiracy theories for propaganda, and revelations of scandals like Watergate or Iran-Contra, led to a fall in public trust of which the popularity of conspiracism is only a symptom (8-9). Likewise, in his essay "Conspiracy Theories About 9/11" Peter Knight claims that "the official discursive construction of 9/11 and the "war on terror" is much closer than one might think to the "outrageous conspiracy theories" (as President Bush called them)" (2). Therefore, the academia pictures such narratives as less socially disruptive because the public attempts to use them for constructive purposes.

The nexus of the problem is the intention and context of a given author. If we read Roth's novel as a warning against potential anti-Semitic and racist sentiments that can surface in any society, then Bengelsdorf's theory must be

untrue, otherwise it would invalidate Roth's argument about the inherent flaws embedded in the American society. Likewise, the emergence of so many conspiracy theories around the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks leads to the opposite conclusion; in the light of what to many appears to be true misconduct on the part of the government, conspiracy theories not only address the real problem, but also point to its true source, insomuch as it is possible to find such. Roth's book and the Bengelsdorf theory presented in it operate on two levels. Within the book, the theory is a product of the paranoid style, the "ever escalating suspiciousness; a sense of persecution; the morbid projection onto the enemy of repressed fantasies that the believer may hold; the apocalyptic fears that a whole way of life is under threat" (Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 19) that characterized American conspiracy theories before the 1960's. The novel, however, comes in a different America, where conspiracism is no longer the "hate-filled *lingua franca* of extremists" (Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 25), and real governmental conspiracies were revealed as true while the unreal ones fill the works of popular culture. This led to the popular viability of conspiracism. Most notably, Fredric Jameson asserted that "conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content" (357). Slavoj Žižek claims, on the other hand, that paranoid construction of reality is "an attempt to heal ourselves of the real 'illness' … the breakdown of the symbolic universe" (19).

In this light, one can agree with Jack Z. Bratich that conspiracy theories are controversial not because of their claims, but because of the manner of their presentation, their "form of thought" (11). Moreover, conspiracism is actually defined by actions taken against it, and such beliefs "come to exist as objects when they come to exist as objects of concern" (160). In other words, it is not the content of the conspiracy theory that is important, but rather the discussion it provokes. They become what Bratich calls a "portal" that provides a means to address certain contemporary political issues, to rationalize them while remaining in control of the discourse (6). "Overarching conspiracy theories may be wrong or overly simplistic", Mark Fenster argues in a similar vein, "but … they may well address real structural inequities, albeit ideologically, and they may well constitute a response … to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or and exploitative economic system" (90).

This leads us back to Philip Roth writing a text that, seemingly, could be read as both attacking the "outrageous conspiracy theories" and condoning armed interventions by showing anti-war and isolationist movements as eager to wage a "war" against their fellow citizens. This reading featured strongly in a highly negative review by Bill Kauffman in the *American Conservative*:

> *The Plot Against America* is the sort of novel a bootlicking author might write to curry favor with a totalitarian government. The author puts a fictive gloss over the officially sanctioned history. Thank God things happened as they did! The alternative to the regime was madness, chaos, murder. Dissenters must be demonized, so Roth saddles his America First villains with positions exactly opposite those they actually took.

This interpretation, despite its vitriolic tone, does have some merit. For indeed, Roth simplifies the political situation to make his point, just as he resolves the novel's climax with what seems a *deus ex machina*. If anything, *The Plot...* does not seem to suggest that history is random, and that, unless for some minute details, it all would go the other way. On the contrary, the seemingly forced ending gives the impression of stability: America was bound to enter the Second World War, the Empire of Japan was bound to attack Pearl Harbor, and anti-Semitism is bound to exist in the U.S. This bitter fact is emphasized by the very first sentence of the novel: "A fear presides over these memories. A perpetual fear" (Roth 1). The trauma caused by the Lindbergh presidency as depicted in the novel perhaps could have been lessened by the Benglesdorf's conspiracy theory, but the Roths witnessed too much to be able to believe it. The very presence of the conspiratorial narrative, however, helps to both apprehend and address the real problem. The protagonist's family, as many others, are faced with a choice, which in turn empowers them to take some semblance of control over reality. The therapeutical function of a conspiracy theory lies, therefore, not in accepting or rejecting the given text, but in the act of choosing it entails.

6. Conclusion – Could It Have Happened?

As suggested above, most novels representing the alternative history genre bear some semblance to conspiracy theories, as they depict fictitious scenarios of a world that could have existed if some event went the other way or, in the case of conspiracy theories, if the world was controlled by a secretive nefarious cabal. And while the two discourses differ in some fundamental ways, they both enable the reader to address the problem. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* was seen as a reminder of the Americans' racist potential and a criticism of the U.S. foreign policy. Philip Roth does something similar, even if he claims that this was not his full intention (Gilarek 228). The question posited in the title of this text is, therefore, not the relevant one. It is actually not the conspiracy theory that becomes a panacea, but the controversy it raises, the narratives that are produced *vis-à-vis* its claims. The former is only a temporary balm, for the curative elements it brings, the explanation,

empowerment, and scapegoat it provides. And while the belief in a conspiracy theory is neither traumatic nor destructive in itself, it may eventually lead to hate-crimes and popular distrust of institutions on the smaller scale, up to a "nihilistic degree of skepticism", and bring about the very same disease it hoped to cure.

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