

# They're Conspiring, Stupid

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Two years ago I was waiting for a late friend in front of a Manhattan pizza place and overheard a heated argument between two men in their young twenties. Pointing at a pigeon pecking at a piece of crust a few meters away, the dispute concerned the animal's identity. One guy was convinced that its common name was "duck". His friend didn't agree, arguing that it was in fact "a bird". This is of course technically correct, but perhaps not as precise as to be the desired answer. A deficit of taxonomic knowledge does not necessarily correlate with historical ignorance, but I could not help but think of this when I read the reports of a *Washington Post* poll conducted around the fifth year anniversary of the 9.11 attacks that revealed that thirty percent of Americans did not remember the year in which the attacks took place—five percent did not even know the month and day. Despite not having unrealistically high expectations about the population's scientific or historical consciousness, such ignorance really is startling. Not that Americans are unique in this regard; similar polls in various countries have recently exposed extreme levels of ignorance in relation to contemporary politics and past horrors like the Holocaust and Gulag. Still, what is so shocking about the 9.11 poll is that the attacks were so recent and that to this day we are constantly reminded that we are living through their immediate consequences. Their coverage in the media was and still is so constant and their cultural representation so ubiquitous that one would suspect that if one cannot even recall in the year in which they took place, the chances of knowing anything at all about their geopolitical history and significance are miniscule.

Polls conducted during the same period show that a similar percentage of Americans, over thirty percent (other polls suggest even higher numbers in New York), suspect some form of government involvement in the planning and/or execution of the 9.11 attacks (the two dominant scenarios being the "inside job" or "let it happen on purpose"—LHOOP—hypotheses).<sup>1</sup> Obviously there is no reason to believe that it is the same thirty percent: that conspiracy theory is the inevitable result of ignorance or that ignorance leads to deluded conspiracy thinking, even if this is often implied when the term "conspiracy theory" is employed disparagingly.<sup>2</sup> Awash in symbolic misery and bereft of any conceptual apparatus to understand the antagonisms, fluctuations, and developments in global society, conspiracy theory is often depicted as an immensely oversimplified narrativization of amorphous and anonymous global power dynamics and economic forces. In a formulation often cited in conspiracy theory, Fredric Jameson claims that "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the post-modern age; it is a 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."<sup>3</sup> The fact that more Americans googled "Nostradamus" than "Bin Laden" in the aftermath of

the attacks gives credence to the claim that to its believers/practitioners, conspiracy theory is perhaps frightening in that it supposedly reveals the evil manipulating our lives but ultimately reassuring in that it gives events a meaning and history a design.<sup>4</sup>

In the conspiracy theories of 9.11 corpus, no single piece of work positing an alternative to the official 9.11 account has gained more popularity or courted more controversy than *Loose Change* (2006).<sup>5</sup> A feature-length film written and directed by Dylan Avery on an inexpensive laptop in his home in upstate New York, Avery and the film's producers, all in their young twenties, estimate that it has been watched by over 100 million people—primarily via the internet. The film argues the attacks were an inside job and considering the aforementioned poll, its conclusions are hardly marginal. No matter how one judges *Loose Change*—whether one sees it as a courageous, inventive, and commendable product of the "Google generation" or an incoherent and paranoid fantasy—its impact and success makes it worthy of scrutiny. It is not only the veracity of its conclusions that should be thought through but also questions it raises about the overall relevance of conspiracy theory for understanding 9.11 and the "War on Terror".

Surprisingly slick considering its almost non-existent production costs, *Loose Change* fires off a litany of charges so rapidly that each is difficult to ponder for more than an instant. After the barrage, many of the allegations seem dubious but one need not believe in the accuracy of everything presented in order to be convinced that something is amiss in the conventional narrative of the attacks as told by the 9.11 *Commission Report* and propagated by the mass media. The film presents two types of evidence to make its case that members of the Bush administration and other elites colluded in a conspiracy. The first is based on what one could call the mechanics or physics of the attacks and how they contradict the official story—this characterizes the majority of the evidence presented in the film, and there are parallels with the "magic bullet theory" in relation to the JFK assassination and the claims that the moon landing was faked. The second is circumstantial evidence meant to attack the character of their main suspects in order to convince a skeptical public that elected officials, bureaucrats, and elites would be capable of such a malevolent action.

The evidence based on the physics of the events asserts that much of the story presented by the 9.11 Commission could not possibly have physically occurred: the World Trade Center towers could not possibly have collapsed due to the collision of the planes and ensuing fire alone, rather, the evidence points to a controlled demolition; the wreckage at the Pentagon and in the Pennsylvania field is inconsistent with a plane crash site and thus we must assume something else, probably a missile, hit the Pentagon and that something else created the smoking crater in Pennsylvania. Facts are reeled off about the temperature at which jet fuel burns and at which

steel melts, and video clips of controlled demolitions are shown alongside quotes from "experts". What is interesting about evidence of this kind is that it is both instantaneously convincing and easily countered. Most people do not have the slightest idea what it takes to bring down a skyscraper, what happens when an airliner hits reinforced concrete, or how difficult it is to turn around a Boeing 757 at 400mph, so having what appears to be credible testimony of any kind can be persuasive. Yet, just by quickly searching online, it is possible to find a myriad of experts disputing the testimonies in *Loose Change* from across the political spectrum. The American

**"The Bush administration does conduct itself conspiratorially: constantly acting under a shroud of secrecy."**

magazine *Popular Mechanics* has even released a book debunking these aspects of the film.

The film's concurrent argument looks at the likely perpetrators of the attacks. Even if one discounts the counter-explanations based on the physical evidence—if one does accept that a plane hit the Pentagon, the towers collapsed due to the impact of the planes and resulting inferno—the possibility of a conspiracy involving actors within the US State remains. This second type of evidence is almost completely circumstantial and is meager in comparison to the amount of physical evidence given. It attempts to show that members of the Bush administration were not only capable of doing something of this magnitude, but that if the evidence is looked at together it suggests that they probably did. A large portion of this evidence has been gathered by trawling the mainstream media, the rest coming from a range of websites of varying reliability. The infamous claim by the neo-conservative think-tank Project for a New American Century claiming that "a new Pearl Harbor" was needed to galvanize Americans into supporting military interventions throughout the Middle East and past instances of American officials recommending committing terrorist acts and then blaming them on a convenient enemy (Operation Northwoods in 1962 involved Cuba) are two of the relatively few facts cited.<sup>6</sup> Circumstantial evidence includes the owner of the World Trade Center taking out a multi-billion dollar insurance policy in the July prior to the attacks, unusually high amounts of put options placed on American Airlines stock in the days before, and the need of the Bush administration to create a justification invading Afghanistan and Iraq.

By the end of *Loose Change* the conspiracy that emerges is enormous. Not only does it include members of the Bush Administration that must have actively planned the attacks, but—and this is only a partial list—the teams that placed

explosives within WTC and faked the voices of passengers on the hijacked planes to call their loved ones, the owner of WTC and then New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, hundreds of stock traders and the SEC that won't reveal who profited substantially from the attacks, Pentagon and WTC clean up crews, and even possibly the passengers on United 93, which did not crash in Pennsylvania but instead landed in Cleveland, and Flight 77, which never hit the Pentagon. As such, it is not surprising that more often than not *Loose Change* has been derided by its detractors as an archetypal conspiracy theory. The response of the filmmakers and many that share their views is that the claim that 9.11 was the result of nineteen Arabs armed with box cutters and orchestrated from a cave in Afghanistan is the most far fetched conspiracy theory of them all. Part of the problem here is that there is no unanimous definition of what exactly constitutes "conspiracy theory". Obviously the term cannot simply designate any claim of conspiracy as the official account of 9.11 is indeed a theory of conspiracy (Zacarias Moussaoui for example was convicted of conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism) and stresses that a small cabal of men were able to drastically change the course of the young twenty first century, provoking wars, curtailments on civil liberties, etc. Furthermore, really existing conspiracies are constantly afoot. To take an example of one of the architects of the "War on Terror", a cursory look at the biography of someone like former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reveals a life rich in conspiracy: from conspiring against George Bush senior to become President Ford's Secretary of Defense and as the CEO of GD Searle & Company against scientists and the American public at large to get NutraSweet approved despite evidence suggesting it gave rats brain tumors, to finally conspiring against pretty much the world to propagate belief in Saddam's WMDs to justify invading Iraq.<sup>7</sup> There are even documented cases in Western democratic states of criminal conspiracies at the highest levels and elements resorting to false flag terrorism against their own populations so one cannot really reject anything *tout court*. How then do we differentiate between a deluded conspiracy theory and research that actually reveals criminal conspiracies other than just saying conspiracy theories are ultimately incorrect theories of conspiracy?

Conspiracy theory has a long and rich history, in the American context stretching back to the colonial period. In what he calls "the paranoid style in American politics", Richard Hofstadter claims that the central image of this style "is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life."<sup>8</sup> Instances of the paranoid style stretch from the anti-Masonic and Illuminati discourses of the 18th and 19th centuries through anti-Catholicism to the anti-communism of the McCarthy period. Hofstadter acknowledges that there are indeed real conspiracies but what differentiates the paranoid style is that conspiracy is seen to be the

◀ Previous spread  
Julietta Aranda, '100 Bent Spoons', 2007.

"I have become interested in the printing mistakes that take place in the assembly line, because of the questions they pose to the notion of value and how it is generated. Using the logic of newspaper production, the misprints carry no value, as they are errors that occur during the printing process. But from another perspective, the same defective quality that erases their commercial value, transforms them in turn into unique objects and embodies them with aesthetic weight.

These badly printed, unreadable newspapers contain on themselves the ghostly imprint of the information that they were originally meant to distribute. But while the properly printed copies are indistinguishable one from the other, the printing mistakes are all unique in their aberration, in a sense each of them is a different rendition of the same information, a subjective approach to the content that while inaccessible is nonetheless fully present."



▶ Model of Dealey Plaza. From Penn Jones, Jr. Kennedy Assassination Materials 1963–1998, The Baylor Collections of Political Materials, Baylor University.

"motive force" in historical events as opposed to social and economic forces. (*Paranoid Style* 29) Michael Barkun's recent study of conspiracy culture identifies three principles found in almost all conspiracy theory: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. He also helpfully differentiates between three different types of conspiracy theories: event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies, and super conspiracies, which seek respectively to explain a single event (JFK assassination for example), explain a series of events by uncovering a single, evil organization behind them (Masons, Jews, Catholics, etc.), or a combination of the two in which conspiratorial groups are linked to various series of events over a considerable time span (Illuminati and New World Order conspiracy theories). (*Culture of Conspiracy* 3–7) Jodi Dean meanwhile has put conspiracy culture within the context of the collapse of meta-narratives associated with postmodernity, while Timothy Melley in a similar manner links their rise with what he calls "agency panic": a crisis in belief in individual agency.<sup>9</sup> Conspiracy thinking became more widespread following the JFK assassination (as well as Moro, Palme, RFK, MLK, etc.) and Watergate, then increased exponentially during the 1990s when they entered into pop culture via the popularity of shows like the *X-Files* and the growth of the internet on which theories could circulate to wide audiences outside of the major publishing houses. The generation of conspiracy theory has become an inevitable consequence of any major event and it is in this context that the attacks on 9.11 took place.

There is indeed ample reason to classify *Loose Change* as conspiracy theory. The researchers behind the film have obviously done a lot of work but the evidence given is highly selective. Any news story or witness testimony that bolsters their argument is utilized, no matter its credibility, while anything that undermines it is either ignored or dismissed as part of the cover up. Even the smallest details have profound meaning: the fact that the tail numbers of the planes that purportedly hit the Pentagon and crashed in Pennsylvania are still listed in the FAA registers as being in use means that they must not have been destroyed that day. Instead of assuming that someone at the FAA forgot to take them off the books for whatever reason, this is seen as a glitch in the conspirators' otherwise mostly flawless scheme.<sup>10</sup> Slips in officials' speech are also taken to be revelatory: for example, a quote by Rumsfeld where he "accidentally" mentions a missile striking the Pentagon. It is also interesting to look at the debate between the makers of *Loose Change* and their debunkers. A key characteristic of a conspiracy theory is it is, in the eyes of its proponents, non-falsifiable. (*Culture of Conspiracy* 7) Every attempt to challenge the theory is dismissed as either a nefarious part of the plot or the result of people tricked by the conspiracy—the more people that oppose the theory, the larger the conspiracy. Thus, in the *Loose Change* vs. *Popular Mechanics* debate, *Popular Mechanics* is dismissed outright as yellow journalism and a

part of the Hearst media empire, which seems to imply that all of corporate America is part of the conspiracy, or at least aiding and abetting.

Overall, instead of placing 9.11 in the historical context of American foreign policy, the rise of radical Islamism, and their combination that lead to the most spectacular blowback imaginable, *Loose Change* concocts around 9.11 an elaborate and ingenious conspiracy perpetrated by elements within the US government and various elites in order to bolster their power at the start of the new century and steal or make billions of dollars. *Loose Change* replaces the complexity of the geopolitical situation that led to 9.11 with an immensely complex and vast conspiracy, and in this sense it is tempting to agree with Jameson's characterization of conspiracy theory as "a poor man's cognitive mapping". One can easily see how the focus on the plot diverts attention away from the documented scandals of the US's policies in the Middle East, and especially certain once-convenient Cold War alliances.

What, however, if beyond these considerations of history and geopolitics, some notion of conspiracy is actually integral to understanding the current situation? While it might not be historically unique in this regard, it may be impossible to understand the actions of the Bush administration simply by understanding "the logic of capital" or by looking at the historical relationship between the US and the Middle East. The Bush administration *does* conduct itself conspiratorially: constantly acting under a shroud of secrecy with decisions made by a small group of individuals, evidence forged, disinformation spread, etc. There was even a small group of policy advisers and analysts within the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans that referred to themselves as "The Cabal". Can we really say that understanding the Bush family's connections to the oil industry or Dick Cheney's role at Halliburton or various other connections between members of the administration and the infamous military-industrial complex has nothing to do with various decisions and policies or that there is no reason to suspect this administration of consistently breaking the law and belittling the US constitution? To put it succinctly: is understanding the conspiratorial behavior of the Bush administration not central to understanding the role of the US state in the world at the present juncture?

Guy Debord claims in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) that the "conspiracy theory of history"—the notion that a small cabal of elite individuals are behind all historical developments, events, and revolutions—"was in the nineteenth century a reactionary and ridiculous belief, at a time when so many powerful social movements were stirring up the masses."<sup>11</sup> The implication being that today, since the masses proper no longer exist after the collapse of the worker's movement, there is indeed small, secretive groups made up of primarily white men with power actively shaping the world. As Hofstadter observed, this conspiracy theory of history dates back to the 18th century and even

Marx felt the International Working Men's Association was being attacked by proponents of the conspiracy theory of history when he writes in 1871, "The police-tinged bourgeois mind naturally figures to itself the International Working Men's Association as acting in the manner of a secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries. Our Association is, in fact, nothing but the international bond between the most advanced working men in the various countries of the civilized world."<sup>12</sup> For Marx, it is this bond that differentiates this organic vanguard from a shadowy cabal manipulating the masses. This Marx quote is doubly relevant in the sense that it addresses the beginning of a specific political, revolutionary sequence that by the time Debord is writing *Comments* has been extinguished. It is the end of this sequence, and the leaving centre stage of its subject—the proletariat—that seems to lead Debord to resuscitate the conspiracy theory of history for what he calls the eternal present of the integrated spectacle.

This centrality of conspiracy to *Comments* partially has to do with the shift in the West that Debord conceptualizes from the "diffuse" to the "integrated" spectacle during the years of "contested spectacle". During this period, the society of the spectacle could no longer rely on "silent compulsion" and as the worker's movement threatened the dominance of capital, conspiracies were hatched to save its very existence. "Formally one only conspired against an established order. Today, *conspiring in its favour* is a new and flourishing profession. Under spectacular domination people conspire to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its well-being. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning." (*Comments* 74) In Italy in the seventies, for example, many of these conspiracies were tied to the infiltration and manipulation of militant groups on the left and right by the secret services and others in government in order to perpetuate campaigns of terror that would frighten the population into supporting the status quo. Spectacular democracy, he writes, wants "to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results." The story of terrorism is written by the state and is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic." (*Comments* 24) While there were elements in groups like the secret Masonic group Propaganda Due (P2) that did indeed want to undermine the state and launch a *coup*, much of their activity did indeed go towards conspiring for the protection of the establish order.<sup>13</sup> In the integrated spectacle, history is undergoing an eclipse, the revolutionary subject is nowhere to be found, and the antagonism that splits society has been spackled over making the conspiracy theory of history accurate and political conflict "now becomes a struggle between enemy brothers", to paraphrase Marx.<sup>14</sup>

Debord is most often thought of as a theorist

of consumer capitalism, but his conception of the spectacle has recently been resuscitated and frequently applied to 9.11 and its aftermath. Almost all of these accounts essentially treat the concept as a synonym for "the world of images" and very few of them deal with Debord's writings on terrorism and conspiracy.<sup>15</sup> There is one notable exception worth dealing with here in that it provides a transition between *Loose Change* and Debord's late writings: Len Bracken's *The Shadow Government: 9/11 and State Terror*. Bracken is the author of a biography of Debord as well as the translator of Gianfranco Sanguinetti's *On The Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1976), which was heavily influenced by Debord and dealt with state terror as part of the "strategy of tension" in 1970s Italy.<sup>16</sup> Bracken is one of the few authors to draw upon Debord's late works, but the manner in which he does so it perhaps surprising. A text that tries to mimic Debord's voice in its tone and historical references (Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, etc.), *The Shadow Government* posits a conspiracy theory of 9.11 that involves the upper echelons of the Bush administration and the intelligence services masterminding the attacks in a manner not drastically different—although better researched and more eloquently argued—from 9.11 conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, David Ray Griffin, Webster Griffin Tarpley, Michael Ruppert, or for that matter David Icke, minus the shape-shifting lizards.<sup>17</sup>

*The Shadow Government* does diverge from *Loose Change* however in the sense that the focus is entirely on historical instances of state terror, false flag operations and the 9.11 plot, and not once on the physics of the attacks. Using a schema drawn from Sanguinetti's *On Terrorism and the State*, written in the context of Italy's "years of lead" and claiming that elements of the state (particularly the security services) were behind much of the terror and even the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, Bracken sees 9.11—as well as the anthrax attacks and the Oklahoma City bombing—as an act of defensive terrorism perpetuated by the US state. In Sanguinetti's conceptualization, defensive terrorism is "always and only" perpetrated by States "either because they are deep in some grave social crisis, like the Italian State, or else because they fear one, like the German State."<sup>18</sup> This is set in opposition to offensive terrorism: acts of terror committed by groups or individuals to harm the state. Only "the desperate and the deluded resort to offensive" terrorism, writes Sanguinetti, claiming these acts are "always doomed to fail."<sup>19</sup> Much of Bracken's text is dedicated convincing the reader that 9.11 is more likely a case of defensive than offensive terror and this is done first by setting historical precedents for his theory of 9.11, adopting Debord's maxim that "people who understand nothing of history can be readily manipulated; even more so than others." (*Comments* 25) "Conspiratorial plans," Bracken writes, "play a part in most, if not all, historical events." (*Shadow Government* 60) He then provides a wide range of evidence gathered from various sources (including publications like *The National Enquirer*) that





◀ FBI agents, fire fighters, rescue workers and engineers work at the Pentagon crash site on Sept. 14, 2001, where a hijacked American Airlines flight slammed into the building on Sept. 11. DoD photo by Tech. Sgt. Cedric H. Rudisill.

suggest 9.11 is an act of state-sponsored terrorism. Bracken tells *The Village Voice* that he has no concrete proof of anything and that the evidence is entirely circumstantial.<sup>20</sup> Still, despite a great deal of dubious sources and leaps of logic there is enough provided to make one suspicious that there is considerably more to the story told by the 9.11 Commission Report (and *Loose Change* for that matter). Overall however, despite the fact that Bracken is clearly drawing on Debord's ideas on the role of conspiracies and terror in the governing of contemporary states, in his own narrative of conspiracy he overlooks a key feature of Debord's theory of the integrated spectacle. Debord described it as "a world where there is no room for verification." (Comments 48) One of the defining characteristics of the reign of the integrated spectacle for Debord was the ambiguity of all political events. This, and his thoughts on terrorism in general, were heavily influenced by the situation in 1970s Italy: a "microcosm of the Cold War" in which revolutionaries and secret agents, coup plots, conspiracies and assassinations, Euroterrorism and stay-behind armies, mafia hitmen and Vatican spies, and even shadowy Freemasons creating parallel governments combined to create an environment in which truth was constantly shrouded.<sup>21</sup> There was no way to know if a bombing was perpetrated by the left, the right in the guise of the left, or the state in the guise of the right impersonating the left. One could not trust the courts to hand down a legitimate verdict; one could not trust investigative journalists, politicians, or whistleblowers to uncover the truth. History was no longer decided, or even influenced, by the masses but by men meeting behind closed doors with the law of *omerta* binding elites in every segment of society. In the integrated spectacle, the truth is not simply hidden, but dissolved by a combination of unanswerable lies, disinformation, and the constant bombardment of trivialities in the media.

In relation to Debord's conspiratorial turn in his later work, Sven Lütticken develops the notion of "structural conspiracies" in his essay "The Conspiracy of Publicness."<sup>22</sup> "These structural conspiracies function to a certain extent as if they were deliberate, actual conspiracies. They may also, at various points, involve real conspiracies, but these do not determine the overall structure." (*Secret Publicity* 194) They are seen to be a result of the growth of the integrated spectacle and the concomitant growth of secrecy, lies, and the occultization of power. Lütticken continues, "A structural conspiracy has an ambiguous ontological status that does not presume lots of people actively and deliberately conspiring, yet it has much the same effect as a real conspiracy." (*Secret Publicity* 195) This notion of structural conspiracy need not only be applied to event conspiracies like 9.11. Perhaps we can also think of systemic structural conspiracies where, for example, the "War on Terror" and "terrorism"—"the disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms", to quote Badiou—necessarily constitute each other.<sup>23</sup> The collusion between Western intelligence agencies (not just the CIA) and Is-

lamic fundamentalists in both Afghanistan and the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s could as such be seen as continuing in the present, albeit on a different plane. To oversimplify a bit, we need not believe that there is a conspiracy within the US state to actively aid Bin Laden (implied early in *Loose Change* as he is said to have been treated in the American Hospital in Dubai and visited by CIA agents two months before the attacks), to see how Bin Laden's actions and very existence have helped the Bush administration or how the Bush administration's foreign policy has helped the Al Qaeda franchise.

In the end the point for Debord is not necessarily whether or not these conspiracy theories are true; rather that the integrated spectacle creates a kind of epistemological uncertainty that prevents one from knowing one way or another. The Debordian conclusion that can be reached from this seems inescapably pessimistic: living "without room for verification" we cannot adequately interpret the world and without a revolutionary subject we cannot hope to change it. But there is another side to the generalized ignorance of the integrated spectacle. Debord writes, "To this list of the triumphs of power we should, however, add one result which has proved negative: once the running of a state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led strategically." (Comments 20) The same forces that cripple resistance undermine power. When one hears that Bush did not even know that Iraqi Muslims were divided into Sunnis and Shiites as late as January 2003 or that those that spoke Arabic and knew the history of the region were dismissed by the administration as "Arabists", it is not that surprising things have gone badly. (*Rumsfeld* 107) Despite not having unrealistically high expectations about the Bush administration's historical and geopolitical consciousness or overall competence, such ignorance—willed ignorance—really is startling. Beyond sitting back and waiting for the spectacle's self-immolation, the writings of the late Debord give little indication of what is to be done to hasten or guarantee its downfall and the creation of a better society.

In the debate around the JFK assassination (as well as similar assassinations like that of Palme), the two competing explanations either focus on a lone gunman or a grand conspiracy. As Timothy Melley observes, "Public discourse about Kennedy's murder routinely revolves around this pair of starkly opposed possibilities, one tracing the murder to an 'atomistic,' and often irrational, individual agent, the other positing a highly organized and power collectivity." (*Empire of Conspiracy* 135) Melley sees these as two sides of the same coin as both theories take on elements of their opposite: lone gunman theorists often look to see how society could produce such a maladjusted individual while advocates of the grand conspiracy see their responsible collective as a liberal individual. An interesting feature of the 9.11 theories is that both the official account and the main conspiracies theories essentially posit a collective agent capable of acting in uni-

son, without leaking their plans, and achieving extraordinary results. And bizarrely, in this conflict, it is those that seem to be the most hostile to the US state that most subscribe to the fantasy of its omnipotence while the official narrative very much demonstrates its fallibility. Despite the calls for action at the very end of *Loose Change*, it is this fantasy of omnipotence that is in many ways the ultimate message propagated by the film. The idea that a relatively small group of Arabs with a relatively small amount of training and resources were able to accomplish such a consequential act is dismissed outright as ludicrous. Yet an administration that has had such difficulty doing *anything* right is accused of pulling off what would easily be considered one of the most brazen and ingenious conspiracies of all time without a single co-conspirator, their numbers in the high hundreds at least, revealing anything. At the same time, the inevitable failure of the 9.11 truth movement is built into the *Loose Change* narrative. With all the elites—media, university, government—in on the plot or afraid to reveal it for whatever reasons, and a government guilty of mass murder unable to make any concessions the movement would consider valid, there is no indication that there is any possibility of the movement succeeding. Even if they were able to convince people that 9.11 was an inside job, there is little reason to think it would make a difference. An ABC News poll taken on the 40th anniversary of the JFK assassination revealed that 70% of the population believe there is more to the plot than demonstrated by the Warren Commission with over 50% believing in a second shooter. Despite millions of Americans believing the state covered up certain details involving the assassination of a president, there is not—and never really was—any real concerted mass movement attempting to discover the truth or dispose of those impeding its realization.

Besides failing to prevent 9.11, probably the Bush administration's other most spectacular failure was its inability to prevent the destruction of much of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. And in a vein similar to 9.11, there are numerous theories (from Lil Wayne to Farrakhan and Alex Jones and David Icke) in which the administration is said to have colluded with various property developers to blow up the levees or let the flooding happen on purpose to rid the city of its underclass in order to turn the city into a sort of Creole Disney. In this case as well Lütticken's concept of structural conspiracy is relevant. The poor living in the flood plain were not protected or effectively rescued, blacks desperately procuring food and water were portrayed by the media as looters while whites doing the same thing were merely doing what they had to do to survive, and housing prices have gone up drastically since the disaster while thousands of the poor have lost their homes. All of this could be interpreted as the nefarious plan of a secret circle of elites within the federal, state, and city governments, real estate, and the media, or as a sign of a reprehensible system that desperately needs to be changed. •

#### Notes

1. "Third of Americans suspect 9.11 government conspiracy" ([www.scrippnews.com/911poll](http://www.scrippnews.com/911poll)) All web-sites last checked 07.08.01 unless stated otherwise.
2. See, for example, Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy* (Carmichael: Touchstone, 1999).
3. Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Gossberg (Ithaca: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 356.
4. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 160. Henceforth cited as *Culture of Conspiracy*.
5. I will be referring here to the second edition of the film. A third edition or final cut is to be released, fall 2007. See [www.loosechange911.com](http://www.loosechange911.com).
6. *Loose Change* is far inferior to a lot other 9.11 conspiracy films and literature in this regard. See for example Alex Jones' occasionally decent, often ludicrous film *Terrorstorm* (2006), Webster Griffin Tarpley's *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in the USA* (Progressive Press, 2007), or Len Bracken's *The Shadow Government* (Adventures Unlimited Press, 2002). Henceforth cited as *Shadow Government*.
7. See Andrew Cockburn, *Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy* (Verso, 2007). Henceforth cited as *Rumsfeld*.
8. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Knopf, 1966), 29. Henceforth cited as *Paranoid Style*.
9. See Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), Dean, *Publicity's Secret* (Cornell University Press, 2002), Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Henceforth cited as *Empire of Conspiracy*.
10. The actual explanation is that these numbers, like a phone number or license plates, can be recycled.
11. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of The Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie, (London: Verso 1998), 59. Henceforth cited as *Comments*.
12. Marx, 'The Fall of Paris', *The Civil War in France* [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/cho6.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/cho6.htm)
13. For Debord's account see, Guy Debord, 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of The Society of The Spectacle', ([www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html)) For more detailed accounts see Philip Willan, *Puppetmasters*, (Aurthor's Choice, 2002), Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies* (London: Routledge, 2005).
14. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. III (London: Penguin, 1993), 362.
15. See RETORT, *Afflicted Powers* (London: Verso, 2005).
16. Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *On the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, trans. Len Bracken (Fort Bragg: Flatland, 1997).
17. See *Terrorstorm: A History of Government Sponsored Terrorism*, dir. Alex Jones (2006), Webster Griffin Tarpley, *9.11 Synthetic Terror* (Joshua Tree: Progressive Press, 2007), Michael Ruppert, *Crossing the Rubicon* (Gabriola Island: New Society, 2004).
18. Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *On terrorism and the state: The theory and practice of terrorism divulged for the first time* (Chronos, 1982) 57.
19. Debord is not as dismissive of all forms of offensive terrorism. In the Situationist International's journal in 1969 he writes, "From the strategic perspective of social struggles it must first of all be said that one should never play with terrorism. But even serious terrorism has never in history had any salutary effectiveness except in situations where complete repression made impossible any other form of revolutionary activity and thereby caused a significant portion of the population to side with the terrorists." Then in the 1979 film *In Girum...*, a picture of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Enslin is shown over the narration, "The flower of youth dies in prison".
20. ([villagevoice.com/books/0236.gray2.38029.10.html](http://villagevoice.com/books/0236.gray2.38029.10.html))
21. Anna Bull, 'Italy and the Legacy of the Cold War', European Research Institute Occasional Paper Series. [www.bath.ac.uk/eri/pdf/op-annabull.pdf](http://www.bath.ac.uk/eri/pdf/op-annabull.pdf) (27.09.06).
22. Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity* (Holland: NAi, 2005), 191–204. Henceforth cited as *Secret Publicity*.
23. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2003).