

The Intersections of Conspiracy Theories and Postmodern Thought in the Long 1960s

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Abstract

This article examines the intersections of postmodern thought and conspiracy theories within the context of the "long 1960s" (roughly 1958-1974). I argue that the period's pervasive skepticism toward grand narratives and authority, fueled by intellectual trends of the era, as well as by countercultural movements and by events such as the Vietnam War and the Kennedy assassination, created a fertile ground for the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The analysis also explores how this cultural shift was reflected in literature, including novels by Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon, and how this phenomenon remains relevant in the present day, in the context of persisting widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories and distrust of authority.

Keywords: Long 1960s, counterculture, conspiracy theories, postmodernism, metanarratives

The limitations and thorough clarification of the title of this essay would necessarily need a lot of space. However, even if the main theoretical and (counter) cultural coordinates are well-known by now, and the clarification of the span and impact of the phrase "the long 1960s" is even easier to establish, it is worth outlining the complex interaction rather than the background that all these elements contribute to an "incredulity narrative." A phrase like "incredulity narrative" here is meant to evoke Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, which is part of the necessary theoretical framework. The theoretical context provided by the emergence and subsequent development of postmodern thought is part of the picture. Arguably, the overall atmosphere of suspicion, incredulity, skepticism, relativism is the overall effect, not particularly of postmodern theories, as of the sum total of a complex set of socio-political developments. Within their framework, perceptions of the geopolitical Cold War "on the outside," and the domestic countercultural ethos, "on the inside," provide relevant touches in the emerging anti-authority dynamic picture pervaded by a strong flavor of conspiracy theories.

Any general definition trying to encompass a vast and complex area of human interactions is inevitably flawed or at least incomplete, but such endeavors are necessary for our grasping and relating to what affected many people in the near past, in an effort of understanding contemporary trends and developments. The postmodern thought in the title above has to do more with some general features of postmodernity as a style of thought and less with specific theories, although particular ideas and claims are always worth considering. Eagleton sees "the illusions" of

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postmodern thought, considering it to be “suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks. grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation” (Eagleton vii). However, this suspicion which Eagleton finds less politically committed than his own form of Marxist grand narrative, was shared by a variety of groups, including the postmodern theorists, but also the revolutionaries promoted various causes in opposition to mainstream or authority-driven discourse. The “true believers,” promoters, fans, and victims of conspiracy theories are also included among these disbelievers in official claims of hegemonic American positions. Their position is even more prominent in times of crisis, and the historical period this essay focuses upon is a good case in point.

Another necessary clarification in relation to the title above and to the problematics under discussion, as well as to its relevance to the present, concerns the phrase “the long 1960s.” Decades have a way of confusing various kinds of commentators, including historians, as to whether the 1950s in America, for example, was an age of consensus and that the 1960s was a revolutionary, countercultural age. Obviously, one cannot speak in absolute terms about the spirit of these ages. It is much easier to try to divide these decades by lengthening or shortening their time span. How about the longer or the shorter 1950s? The phrase has been used, but here one is concerned with the lengthening of the subsequent decade. “The long Sixties” was a phrase used by such authors as Arthur Marwick (1998) and Christopher B. Strain (2016).

Social historian Arthur Marwick used the phrase to describe what was going on in the US and Western Europe from the late fifties to the mid-seventies: *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974*. This (counter) cultural revolution assumed a variety of related forms, from aspects of individual and group identities and liberties, lifestyles, beliefs, convictions, with the realization that everything, including individual daily life, is political. From the more individual statements of the Beats in the late fifties to the more widespread countercultural movement emerging in the following decade, in parallel with the ever more widespread impact of the civil rights movement and important gay rights, feminist and women’s rights demonstrations and theoretical voices, this cultural revolution shaped the lives of many people, mainly of the SDS militants, yippies and hippie baby-boomers of the sixties fond of their Make Love, Not War slogan that informed the anti-Vietnam War.

Robert Stone’s *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*, while confirming the relative temporal and countercultural boundaries of the long sixties in his 2007 volume (more precisely, from 1958 to 1972) has at its core the author’s relationship with one of the iconic figures of the LSD-fueled movement that linked the generations of the Beats and of the psychedelic experimenters the 1960s, Ken Kesey. Author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kesey became famous with some young Americans and notorious with the FBI agents for his trips across America in his flamboyantly painted school bus Furthur and his promotion and generous donations of numerous doses of acid (LSD) to enthusiastic fans. These trips and the same character, Kesey, as well as his friends of The Merry Pranksters and The Grateful Dead, were also central in another non-fiction novel of the time, Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. As all these intersections of what some may call cultural poetics and Greenblatt agreed to call new historicist approaches resist clear ordering, part of Kesey’s special story in relation to both LSD and the CIA will follow a little later in this text of intersections of what is commonly called, in critical theory, culture, including not only texts and practices, but also institutions and their power structures.

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While Stone and Wolfe explore the long decade in a weird, turbulent, nonconformist America, Marwick, in his previously mentioned book, covers many of the manifestations of this revolutionary spirit both at home (he was British) and abroad, focusing on the British prominence in music and fashion, the revolutionary fervor of the French students of 1968, but devoting a lot of attention to the realm of what would be called the counterculture, baby-boomer America. While concluding that this long decade witnessed spectacular developments in intellectual debate, in politics, the arts, in civil rights, Marwick also noted that it turned out to be terribly divisive, heralding a feature that will mark American culture since then, a feature that one sees even today in the mid-2020s, exacerbated by the devastating, and very “democratic” effect of the social media.

The nonconformism and prevailing anti-Establishment, anti-authority culture of a considerable section of the young generation of the age was, most likely, not necessarily inspired by some of the progressive intellectual figures of the age but was part of the largely postmodernist *zeitgeist* in America and France, some of which literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes put forth in his essay, “The Death of the Author.” At the time when the students and workers challenged the authority of French president Charles de Gaulle in one of the most dramatic moments of the long Sixties (May 1968), Barthes was equally challenging the authority, God-like (Gaulle-like?) of the Author. The author of ... “The Death of the Author” kills in cold blood the myth of the authority of the author as Author in order to elevate the status of the reader: “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 146).

The same anti-authority perspective, which pervades not only intellectual circles, but will be part of the countercultural attitudes of the anti-Establishment baby-boomers, is also promoted by the already hinted at Lyotardian rejection of metanarratives as brief definition of the postmodern: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 259). What is more, by questioning the goal of truth in scientific research, Lyotard is also associated with the postmodern trend that would culminate in the word “post-truth” becoming the word of the year in 2016¹, but which would also confirm large audiences in the long Sixties to question and oppose official narratives. In his *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Zygmunt Bauman, while describing the varieties of responses, also defines an attitude that one may link to the more relaxed hippies and to the less socially committed paranoid consumers of conspiracy theories. Bauman describes this postmodern attitude as “licence to do whatever one may fancy and advice not to take anything you or the others do too seriously” (Bauman vii). This “licence to do whatever one may fancy” applies less to the more dedicated SDS² militants inhabiting the same tumultuous age.

Lyotard opposes the totalitarianism of the grand narratives of modernity, focusing on observations related to outstanding developments in the areas of science and mass media, but a similar incredulity towards authority was building up as a result of popular perceptions of what would be called the failure of the Enlightenment by some, and would be expressed by a proliferation of conspiracy theories that reflected not only the incredulity of progressive scholars and scientists in the prevailing grand narratives, but also a growing incredulity of large segments

¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

² Students for a Democratic Society, the activist organization involved in anti-Vietnam War and Black Power events.

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of the countercultural generation towards official government hegemonic discourse, also to be found in some of the literary expressions of that widespread discontent.

These literary expressions were about to challenge another cherished post-war American (grand) narrative, the just and still glamorous history chapter of the war fought by brave American soldiers to free the world of Nazism, fascism and Japanese imperialism. In Europe and in other parts of the world, the tremendous destruction and barbarity that science and technology associated with warfare had already shattered many people's belief in a logocentric world. The seeds of postmodern thought among many ordinary people who had witnessed the death of civilization and the attending death of a compassionate God were already there. In America, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the absence of the havoc that warfare had wrought on the rest of the world and the country's unprecedented prosperity tempted many people, mainly male and white, to appreciate the prosperity that a welfare state was lavishing on them. It had been a just war, some of the young people had been heroes and had enjoyed the benefits of the G.I. Bill for war veterans: affordable housing in the new suburban Levittowns, free higher education, big cars, cheap gas and all the amenities that a booming consumerism was offering. Nevertheless, their children, the baby-boomers, were growing up. They were the largest generation in American culture and, fed up with the conformism of their parents, they wanted to assert themselves on their anti-system terms. The label that would stick to them as part of the long Sixties will be contributed by Theodore Roszak in his volume, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Roszak 1969). This "technocratic society" that the author sees the young people opposing is "not simply a power structure wielding vast material influence [...] is a veritable mystique that is deeply endorsed by the populace" (Roszak xiv). The countercultural youths are incredulous towards that mystique.

That mystique affecting mainstream America had its limits and qualifications. It is true that the Cold War had already begun, that the Arms Race and the Space Race were breaking disquieting news, that the Korean War appeared to slightly change the Americans' view on overseas military interventions. The "short Fifties," so to speak, provided the mixed blessing (or curse) of anxiety (about a possible nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union) and affluence. However, a firm patriotic trust, not only in the dollar and in God, but also in the American Government's power to rule was still widespread. For many, it was still an age of credulity towards the hegemonic discourse, but the general picture was very complex.

And then, in the 1960s, as the anti-Establishment generation was growing up, a number of novelists were beginning to question the prevailing narrative of the Second World War, as the American involvement in the Vietnam War was rearing its ugly head, with the shocking exposure of the My Lai massacre in 1968 being one of the last straws. This is the situation which Christina Jarvis describes as "the Vietnamization of World War II" in connection with some of the works of such prominent emerging novelists as Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut. These initiated an incredulity, anti-war narrative that would be followed by others as well:

Following the lead of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse – Five* [by Vonnegut] and *Gravity's Rainbow* [by Pynchon] deconstructed the binary framing of America's "good war," offering a "Vietnamized" version, full of discontinuities, fragmented bodies, and multiple shades of gray (Jarvis 81).

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If the interpretations of such central characters as John Yossarian, Billy Pilgrim or Tyrone Slothrop in the above-mentioned novels is highly problematic³, the general message is definitely anti-authoritarian, anti-war, in keeping with the rising attitude of contestation of a large audience that responded to them (with the exception of that to the more arcane, less accessible *Gravity's Rainbow*).

A more accessible and more influential narrative combining an anti-authority message and a preoccupation with conspiracy theories what would soon become the most widespread postmodern novel on American campuses and stay there for decades was another novel by Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa Maas, the protagonist, is initially summoned to execute the will of a former lover, the incredibly rich Pierce Inverarity, whose possessions apparently extend everywhere. Oedipa ends up making a paranoid attempt at piecing together the vast maze of a world conspiracy and competition involving two rival secret societies dealing with covert global communication, the Tristero and the Thurn und Taxis, as linked to Pierce Inverarity's fortune without frontiers. There is a possible final clue to be obtained at the end of the short novel, during the auction which the title announces, the crying of a mysterious lot 49, but the innumerable questions posed throughout the text about Inverarity's legacy⁴ are bound to remain unanswered, haunting the whole narrative. This paranoid preoccupation with the unraveling of a dense network of connections in a comprehensive conspiratorial plot appears to display what Brian Nicol calls "the epistemic transition from modernism to postmodernism" but which can also be seen here as the two wings, conspiratorial and postmodern, of the tumultuous age of the long Sixties. Nicol goes on to describe "interpretive paranoia" in "examples of postmodern fiction which obsessively foreground the process of interpretation" (Nicol 44).

One might think that some people fascinated by conspiracy theories take them for entertainment, while others might like to prove to themselves that they are not easy to manipulate by the official statements of the powers that be in an environment in which the authority of the state appears to be declining. The paranoia stirred by the so-called Second Red Scare animated by Senator McCarthy, but initiated by President Truman's Executive Order 9835⁵, had divided America in an otherwise quieter "age of liberal consensus" of the previous, "shorter Fifties."

It seemed to stimulate more than a minor hobby or a temporary disfunction of the American body politic and more of what historian Richard Hofstadter called an enduring "paranoid style in American politics" in his eponymous 1965 volume, mainly defined by "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (Hofstadter 3). Although the author appears to suggest that the paranoid style is mainly a defining American identity feature, he does not fail to trace the paranoia of conspiracy all the way back to the late 18th century, particularly to the work of a Jesuit priest who had taken refuge in England, where his "Memoires pour servir a l'histoire du Jacobinisme" were translated into English and published both there and then across the ocean. The work described a triple conspiracy of anti-Christians, Freemasons, and Illuminati whose aim was to destroy religion and order (Hofstadter 12). And then, a long tradition of interest

³ To what extent can Yossarian be called an anti-hero, considering his final attitude to his military superiors, and to what extent is Billy Pilgrim an alter ego of the author, considering his views on the Green Berets?

⁴ "How many shared Tristero's secret, as well as its exile? What would the probate judge have to say about spreading some kind of legacy among them all, all those nameless..." (Pynchon 139).

⁵ [EXECUTIVE ORDER 9835 | Harry S. Truman](#)

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in conspiracy theories begins, with the Illuminati still featuring prominently in 21st century theories as well, theories which recently came to hijack the Great Reset.⁶

Although, as Hofstadter's volume claims, there is a permanent, prevailing paranoid style in American politics, the author, while mentioning previous cases of political paranoia, makes connections between McCarthy's paranoid politics of the 1950s and prominent figures of the 1960s, mainly Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, who had sought nomination in the 1964 presidential campaign. For a general audience, in between the McCarthy paranoid, anti-Communist loyalty crusades of the 1950s and Barry Goldwater's political paranoia, it was the plethora of conspiracy theories linked to the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in November 1963 that partly galvanized, partly depressed or disappointed. Kennedy's assassination

fed into a culture of paranoia, a sense of default scepticism that saw evidence everywhere of a shadow government based on institutionalised secrecy and immune to democratic control, with the vulnerable individual the victim of a vast conspiracy of interlocking and increasingly impersonal organisations and forces (Knight 105 – 106).

In DeLillo's novel, *Libra*, Kennedy's assassination conspiracy features a number of anti-Castro, anti-Communist groups, as well as former members of the CIA. They all take part in a covert operation which is meant to provide the US government with serious reasons for another, more successful anti-Castro military intervention than that of the failed Bay of Pigs episode. Oswald is a puppet in the conspiracy that CIA agents are planning. He is to be used in the scenario bound to make Fidel Castro appear to be plotting to assassinate the American president. The assassination attempt is designed to fail. Its aim is to provide the needed reason for American retaliation against Communist Cuba. Ironically, some of the conspirators are blissfully unaware that the carefully planned failed attempt will turn into Kennedy's real assassination.

DeLillo's novel, as well as a large number of public statements in the wake of Kennedy's assassination, voices an increased interest in the power of conspiracy theories, which will be part of the decades following the tragic November 22nd, 1963 Dallas event. Hofstadter, while describing "the paranoid style in American politics," did not link it to a large section of the country's population, seeing it as "the preferred style only of *minority* movements"(Hofstadter 7), Jesse Walker, in his 2013 volume, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, sees the influence and the appeal, the popularity of conspiracy theories as affecting most of the American population over a long period after 1963, with the title of one of the book's chapters clearly making a statement to this effect: *The Paranoid Style Is American Politics*. The statistics are chilling, and one could have a suspicion that similar situations might be identified in other cultures as well:

In 2006, a nationwide Scripps Howard survey indicated that 36 percent of the people polled—a minority but hardly a modest one—believed it "very" or "somewhat" likely that U.S. leaders had either allowed 9/11 to happen or actively plotted the attacks. Theories about JFK's assassination aren't a minority taste at all: Forty years after John F. Kennedy was shot, an ABC News poll showed 70 percent of the country believing a conspiracy was behind the

⁶ [What is the Great Reset - and how did it get hijacked by conspiracy theories?](#)

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president's death. (In 1983, the number of believers was an even higher 80 percent (Walker 13).

This widespread suspicion of official discourse had many sources, and the impression that obscure forces, including covert government operations largely contributed to this "postmodern conspiratorial incredulity towards official narratives" reigned supreme. Looking back on what may be called here "the long Sixties," anthropologist David H. Price recollects the contribution of outstanding university researchers to such projects as MK-Delta and MK-Ultra, funded by the CIA: "These programmes used unwitting scientists to study methodically whether effective forms of 'mind control', 'brainwashing', interrogation and torture could be achieved" (Price 8). In the context of the critical phases of the Cold War, if the Russian secret services were working on "mind control," why would the Americans lag behind?

The intersections between covert secret operations, both at home and abroad, conspiracy theories, postmodern incredulity, psychedelic culture and American fiction is to be noted as well. The investigations of US Senate Church Committee (chaired by Frank Church) compelled the passing of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, thus confirming the perception of the "state that surveils us all, and tries to control our minds," which will continue to feed the sensitivity to conspiracy theories and paranoid attitudes. Another consequence of MK-Ultra was the writing of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. While working in a mental institution and busy doing research for the novel, the author volunteered for the CIA secret program. He came to develop more than a taste for the hallucinogenic drugs generously administered to him during the experiments he underwent, so much so that, artistically, this helped him imagine the nightmarish, deranged, paranoid vision of Chief Bromden, the narrator of the novel. Much more important for American (counter) culture, however, was that his dependence on, and appreciation for, the creative effects of LSD led to his expeditions across the US and promotion of psychedelic culture. It so happened that the CIA (unwittingly) and Kesey himself (very deliberately), became major actors of one of the defining avenues of the American counterculture of the long Sixties.

The cock (-and-bull-) tail of tales intersecting in the long 1960s is intended to provide a tentative perspective on the diversity and mixture of discourse strands that kept America both united and disunited, with grand narratives being challenged by both distinguished postmodern theorists and a mixed bunch of more or less troublemaking voices, some of them promoters of anti-authority and conspiracy theory texts.

This particular text, while deliberately weaving strings of sometimes divergent cultural narratives, while noting their links and intersections, has difficulty, in this chaotic age, ordering them in a hierarchy or a coherent structure that might be meant to support their relevance for what is going on in contemporary American culture. There are discernible roots or origins for some of the contemporary "grapes of wrath," to transplant Steinbeck's memorable phrase into the soil of this new millennium. Some of the contemporary grapes are sweet or bittersweet, some might say. Some might insist that the revolutionary spirit of the long 1960s stimulated the democratization of the US, with progress in terms of race, gender, ethnicity as the obvious illustrations. And then, the outstanding democratization of culture facilitated by the equally outstanding progress of information and communication has turned more and more people into active participants rather than mere consumers of culture, particularly "very popular" popular culture. The power involved

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in the use of the social platforms has worked to enable some to promote and take advantage of ever newer conspiracy theories, while recycling the older ones, with populism and sovereigntism as two of the prevailing ideologies that appear to make the world go round, and round, and round, picking up dizzying speed.

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