
Enemies Within blends densely documented scholarship with a brisk repartee worthy of both its distinguished imprinter and the reader's attention. For those unfamiliar with conspiracy tales in recent popular culture the book offers a convenient sampling. Conjectures regarding the reach of Communist influence, end-time prophecy, opposition to the Nation of Islam and Black America, the JFK assassination, and alien visitations all receive chapter-long, detailed retellings. Much of this is the familiar grist of late night AM talk shows, newsstand tabloids, and entertainment industry fantasy-drama. To these stories the author supplies addenda, correctives, and qualifications, critiques data and sources, and offers a general debunking in favor of conventional wisdom: the Warren Commission was right, Louis Farrakhan's racism wrong, the Illuminati and the aliens aren't, and so forth. This sampling brings together diverse threads of popular culture into a common skein. But there are loose ends. Much is said of enemies within but little of the culture of conspiracy.

Missing definition: What is a conspiracy? It is whatever the author chooses to identify as such, commonly a negative notion of clandestine networks and nefarious intent, simultaneously wrongheaded and wrong-hearted. According to Robert Alan Goldberg, conspiracy notions derive from flawed epistemology applied with selective malice. Conspiracists are not like us. Researchers order and evaluate; conspiracists cull, curry, and concoct. Conspiracists' arguments are ad hoc, haphazard, and biased; analysts' are even, balanced, and valid. In this vein analytic induction is deemed unnecessary. Exampling will do. So it is in Enemies Within.

Ignoring the mainstream: Why does the author rehash readings of Revelation while ignoring secular prophecy, the ostensible signs of secret linkages in the economy stitched together by get-rich gurus on cable TV infomercials and Wall Street pundits revealing the heretofore hidden symptoms of a “new” economic order during the late 1990s’ dot-com frenzy? Why retell the venerable Roswell, New Mexico, story, while disregarding present-day warnings of an “Axis of Evil” from the highest authority in our land, warnings he perhaps learned on his father's knee from another conspiracist given to alarms over a “dark force” emanating from the Evil Empire? Likewise, narrowing conspiracism to North American interpretations of a fragment of Christian scripture seems too limited. Why is nothing said of the broader rumors of invisible, mysterious celestial influences behind such paradoxes as virgin births, inconsumable burning brush, parting seas, water walking, reanimation of the dead, afterlife in perpetuity, and other improbable events?
Missing the point: Scholars who inquire directly into the social lives of contemporary conspiracists hear talk less absolute and explicit, more evocative and exploratory, than secondary print sources suggest. Among themselves, conspiracists more often narrate than debate. Diverse scenarios coexist without discord. Conspiracy tales accrue respect as stories, judged, as in Hellenic poetry contests, on the bases of artful drama, clever plot twists, and especially refinements in technical detail, not on the basis of correspondence to the empirical. These stories need to be believable, not provable; to evoke imagination, not reveal first principles or primal truths. Among gun-show gossips, Orange County political parlor participants, and back-road rural parishioners, conspiracy tales are told like contemporary urban legends. Accounts of happenings in which the narrator has not been directly involved are presented as propositions for belief, “strange but true” events that could occur, told as if their probability were high. Such conspiracy tales are, as Spinoza revealed the Bible to be, not literal assertions of hard-edged facticity but nuanced allegory.

Again, what is conspiracy? Does it reflect psychological confusions and delusions? The author rejects these in principle, then affirms them in practice, saturating his text with references to “conspiracy thinking,” “conspiracy beliefs,” and other intra-psychic flaws and floundering. (The author does not clarify how to obtain knowledge of these deep inner feelings). More correctly, “conspiracy” is rhetorical excess, hyperbole, exaggeration of opponents’ intent, or is used to set off the program of one social movement activist, moral entrepreneur, politician, evangelist, reformer, revolutionary, or candidate from another.

To find conspiracy everywhere is to reduce the concept to a bargain word, an expression used with an air of expertise signifying little. Enemies Within points out the problem and displays it. In the end, conspiracy is no longer a topical curiosity but an impending crisis. The author uncovers a “cult of conspiracy” and a “darker context that nourishes conspiracy thinking” in the routine functionings of federal government (p. 256). He warns that for a “half-century or more, a cult of secrecy has dominated the bureaucracy of Washington” (p. 256). End times draw near. “Conspiracy thinking has moved Americans beyond a healthy skepticism of authority . . . . the cancer of conspiracism has begun to metastasize. Without new awareness of its character and quick intervention, countersubversion may overcome the body politic” (p. 260). In this company William Pierce, Cotton Mather, and Louis Farrakhan would be right at home.

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