

Complots of Mischief

By Charles Pigden

Abstract

In Part 1, I contend (using Coriolanus as my mouthpiece) that Keeley and Clarke have failed to show that there is **anything** intellectually suspect about conspiracy theories *per se*. In Part 2, I argue (in *propria persona*) that the idea that there *is* something suspect about conspiracy theories is one of the most dangerous and idiotic superstitions to disgrace our political culture.

1. Coriolanus, Philosopher

'It is a purposed thing and grows by plot,
To curb the will of the nobility'¹

So says Coriolanus on discovering that the common folk, who have just given him their 'voices' to be consul, have 'straight disclaimed their tongues' and are now opposed to his election. And he is right. The leaders of the popular party, the Tribunes Brutus and Sicinius, fear that if the reactionary Coriolanus becomes consul, their 'office [that is the tribunate] during his power [may] go sleep'². Coriolanus is widely touted as 'chief enemy to the people'³ and even more so to the tribunes, their elected representatives. Accordingly, they have sent out their lieutenants to foment a 'mutiny'.

Brutus

Get you hence instantly, and tell those friends,
They've chose a consul that will from them take
Their liberties; make them of no more voice
Than dogs that are as often beat for barking
As therefore kept to do so.

Sicinius

Let them assemble,
And on a safer judgment all revoke
Your ignorant election⁴

This is a conspiracy, being a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action. A relatively small group is plotting to mobilize public

¹ William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act III, Scene 1.

² *Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene 1.

³ *Coriolanus*, Act I, Scene 1.

⁴ *Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene 3.

opinion, which they will subsequently represent as an outburst of popular feeling.

Sicinius

To the Capitol, come:

We will be there before the stream o' the people;

And this shall seem, as partly 'tis, their own,

Which we have goaded onward⁵.

The senators, of course, are carefully kept out of the loop. Thus Brutus' reply to the outraged Coriolanus, 'Call't not a plot' is a flat-out lie. But there is more to the conspiracy than revoking the popular vote. Brutus and Sicinius hope to provoke Coriolanus (who is notable for his 'noble carelessness') into such a display of aristocratic *hauteur* as will make his election impossible.

Sicinius

At some time when his soaring insolence

Shall touch the people—which time shall not want,

If he be put upon 't; and that's as easy

As to set dogs on sheep—will be his fire

To kindle their dry stubble; and their blaze

Shall darken him for ever⁶.

Coriolanus is indeed such a hothead that even if he knew they were plotting to provoke him, he might not be able to resist being provoked. However, he does not know it, which means that the subsequent unforgivable outburst, which brings about his downfall, is likewise the result of a secret plan. The provocative actions are public but the provocative purpose is not, though it is pretty clear that the other senators, who desperately try to shush the irrepressible Coriolanus ('Not now, not now', 'Not in this heat, sir, now' 'No more words, we beseech you'), have wised up to what Brutus and Sicinius are about. Coriolanus himself, though not the most intellectually well-endowed of Shakespeare's heroes, is well aware that he is the victim of a conspiracy, and a conspiracy moreover which is part of a larger plan to 'curb the will of the nobility'.

⁵ *Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene 3.

⁶ *Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene 3.

What actually went on in the early days of the Roman Republic is lost in the mists of antiquity, but Shakespeare has fashioned out of Livy and Plutarch an eminently realistic political drama. ('Class Struggles in Rome' would not have been a bad title for some parts of the play.) Brutus and Sicinius are perhaps a little slimier than the general run of democratic politicians (at least in New Zealand) but they are nothing unbelievable⁷. Conspiracies of the kind that Shakespeare depicts are part and parcel of political life. If you don't like the outcome of a vote you can try and muster a majority to get it overturned, often taking care not to tell your opponents what you are doing. If your opponents are excitable or aggressive it is a good ploy to goad them into saying something stupid. As Roy Hattersley records in his memoirs, this was precisely the tactic that he and his staff employed when trying to embarrass Margaret Thatcher at Prime Minister's Question Time.⁸ Politics, even democratic politics is often a rather conspiratorial business, and those who believe it to be so - that is, conspiracy theorists - would appear, on the face of it, to be perfectly rational. However, this is not the opinion of Keeley and Clarke. How would they respond to the rather dim-witted and choleric conspiracy theorist, Caius Marcius Coriolanus?

Keeley

My lord, although there may be such a plot,
'Tis folly to believe it

⁷ And it has to be said that their fears of an oligarchic *coup* if Coriolanus becomes consul seem eminently reasonable:

Coriolanus:

in a rebellion,
When what's not meet, but what must be, was law,
Then were [the tribunes] chosen: in a better hour,
Let what is meet be said it must be meet,
And throw their power i' the dust.

This seems to have been his Mother had in mind (poor Coriolanus is a dreadful Mummy's boy) though she wishes he had been a bit more conspiratorial about it.

Volumnia

You might have been enough the man you are,
With striving less to be so; lesser had been
The thwartings of your dispositions, if
You had not show'd them how ye were disposed
Ere they lack'd power to cross you.

Thus both parties in the class war reasonably suspect conspiracy on the part of the other.

⁸ See Hattersley, Roy (1995) *Who goes Home*, pp. 264-266

Coriolanus

Why, how's that?

Keeley

My noble Lord, there are indeed some things
 Which though they may be true, it is not meet
 For wise men to believe⁹. Though there may be
 Complots of mischief and conspiracies,
 The darks designs of devious, wicked men,
 Yet to believe it shows a grievous a fault.¹⁰
 What we believe, we mostly take on trust
 And if we cannot trust we nothing know.
 To think that we are mostly sore deceived
 Is to commit self-slaughter of the mind,
 To smother in a mist of ignorance.
 Why, if we cannot trust we cannot tell
 What is from what is not¹¹. Our very names
 We only know from what **our** dams do say.
 It is Volumnia's word that makes you think,
 That you are Caius Marcius ...

⁹ I remark in passing that there is something rather paradoxical about Keeley's thesis just as there is something rather paradoxical about the corresponding thesis suggested by Clarke. In my book a belief-forming strategy is *rational* if it tends to achieve the truth across a wide array of possible circumstances and seldom results in falsehood. Yet, both Keeley and Clarke admit that conspiracies sometimes occur, which means that a belief-forming strategy they recommend – a strategy that systematically discounts conspiracy - is *prima facie* at fault.

¹⁰ Keeley's position is consciously modeled on Hume's in his famous essay 'Of Miracles' (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X). According to Keeley, what Hume believes is that although miracles *may* occur it is *never* rational to believe in them, at least upon testimony. Keeley subscribes to the weaker thesis that although conspiracies *sometimes* occur, it is *usually* not rational to believe in them, especially if the corresponding theory displays some of the following features: (1) it runs counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account, (2) it postulates nefarious intentions on the part of the plotters, (3) it ties together seemingly unrelated events (a heinous crime this!) and/or (4) the truths behind the events explained are well-guarded secrets, even though the perpetrators may be well-known public figures. Coriolanus's conspiracy theory possesses at least two of these features, because it runs counter to the official theory of the tribunes (who are, after all important office-holders) and because it postulates intentions, which, so far as Coriolanus is concerned, are nefarious in the extreme. Consequently, it would appear to be the kind of conspiracy theory that should not be believed.

¹¹ Keeley's point is that some conspiracy theories – or perhaps the research programs of which some conspiracy theories constitute the cores – are so extensive as to call into question most of what we know on testimony. Since most of what we know *is* known on the basis of testimony – since, as Tony Coady puts it, we know very little 'off our own bats' – to accept such a theory is to commit intellectual suicide. If testimony is systematically unreliable, we know virtually nothing. And the claim is that it is not rational to believe a thesis with such intellectually catastrophic consequences.

Coriolanus

By the Gods!

I've never heard such skimble-skamble stuff!
 Because I think these shallow, chatt'ring curs,
 These Tritons of the minnows¹², these vile - 'tribunes'
 (For I do think that is the worst of words)
 Conspire and plot to cause my overthrow,
 Must I believe my Mother is a liar?
 That men do lie I have good cause to know,
 As all men know that sometimes walk abroad,
 Outside the cloistered dens of learned fools.
 But though some men do lie and some do cloak
 Their dark designs in servile secrecy,
 It does not follow – nay, it is not so –
 That *all* men lie and *no* man tells the truth.
 If th' everlasting gods have fixed their cannon
 Against self-slaughter of the intellect¹³,
 I sin not when I do suspect such **men**
 (Base Brutus and the sly Sicinius)
 Of crooked, low and vile conspiracy.
 To trust them not is not to give up trust
 In testimony's witness; nor to doubt
 All that I know that's known upon report¹⁴.

Keeley

But noble Coriolanus nonetheless,
 You may commit another kind of fault.
 By rashly positing conspiracy,
 You make the world more rational than it is,

¹² *Coriolanus*, Act III, Scene 1.

¹³ Paraphrased from *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 2.

¹⁴ Coriolanus' conspiracy theory, like most conspiracy theories, does not posit a conspiracy so extensive as to call all testimony into question. The same goes for the 'unwarranted' conspiracy theory that Keeley himself discusses, namely that the BAFT had some degree of complicity in the Oklahoma bombings. I can have a low opinion of the veracity of both the BAFT and the FBI without lapsing into a paralyzing skepticism.

Attribute purpose to the purposeless,
 Read reason into what is reasonless,
 Because you cannot tolerate the thought,
 That chance and not design doth rule the world.
 You do prefer the plots of evil men,
 To worlds where none can ever lose the plot
 Since there's no plot to lose: where there's no plan,
 But time and chance and witless randomness.
 You cannot bear the thought. And thus for you
 Evil is better than absurdity¹⁵,
 A plot to happenstance ...

Coriolanus

Why that's enough!

The mutable, rank-scented moiety
 May change their minds, but not as quick as that,
 Not all at once; not without prompting. No,
 They were persuaded to it, I am sure.
 And if they were, who did it but that pair
 Of slinking, sly and cankered politicians
 And their base acolytes? They have conspired
 To bring me down and rob me of my fame.
 Though chance may rule the world, what chance is there,
 That the base multitude, all at one breath,
 Should on a sudden all take back their breaths
 That I did beg for in the marketplace?
 But if you think that I take comfort from't.
 That I believe what I would fain be true,
 Then sure, you are mistaken. I do know,
 That some men plan, for I know I do plan;
 That some men plan in secret, for I know
 That I, from time to time, have secret plans.
 (Howe'r so brave a warrior may be,

¹⁵ Keeley's insinuates that a belief in conspiracy theories betokens a cowardly refusal to face up to an absurd reality in which 'shit happens'.

He bootless fights who fights without a plan,
 Or shows his enemies his true intent.)
 I do not lie, not even to my foes,
 But I have spider-foes who lie to me.
 Endeav'ring to entrap me in their webs.
 Perhaps the world at large is purposeless.
 But *men* have purposes, both good and bad.
 All that's required for base conspiracy
 Is secret plans pursued by secret means,
 And sometimes lightly sauced with hateful lies.
 That's all!
 So when I say that some men do conspire
 I read no reason into this our world
 Than that we know exists: no purposes
 But those of men we *know* have purposes.
 As for absurdity, why, this I say:
 It's a mad world indeed where such as they
 (Brutus, that is, and damn'd Sicinius)
 Such things, such vile and petty, stinking *things*,
 Can have the power – the *power!* – to do me wrong,
 To rob me of everything I once held dear –
 My consulship, my hearth, my home, my bed,
 My wife, my son, indeed my very Rome,
 To rob me, worst of all, of – well no more!
 The gods care not: they have no purposes,
 Unless their purpose is to see the play,
 To laugh as we do laugh when players speak,
 To sigh as we do sigh when players die,
 Taking our pleasure in the player's woe.
 No, learned Sir, I say conspiracy
 Consistent is with grim absurdity¹⁶.

¹⁶ Keeley's suggestion that a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories involves a cowardly refusal to face up to absurdity is itself absurd. A world in which yahoos, nitwits and evildoers plot against each other often with indifferent success and with catastrophic side-effects, is a world in which a great deal of shit happens, much of it unintended. For example, if members of the Bush administration conspire to use the 9/11 conspiracy as a pretext to invade Iraq, and if Chalabi and his cohorts conspire to feed them a lot of cock-and-bull stories about how welcome they will be, and if as an unintended

Clarke

My lord, you're right but yet I think you're wrong.
 Reasons there are though Keeley knows them not
 Why thinking men should doubt conspiracy.
 Theories that posit plots do mostly form
 The cores and central claims of research programs
 That Lakatos would call 'degenerate'¹⁷...

Coriolanus

'Degenerate'! How? Am I 'degenerate'?

Clarke

Peace, peace, my lord, I meant not to offend!
 For me 'degen'rate' is a term of art,
 Which I apply to theories not to men ...

Coriolanus

So 'tis my thoughts you call 'degenerate'!
 That's better, but not much! Why do you say
 It is 'degenerate' if I believe
 That Brutus and Sicinius have conspired
 To spoil me of the consulate?

consequence of all this tens of thousands of people die and there are *more* Muslim terrorists than there were before, then we not only live in a world where shit happens but a world in which it all too frequently hits the fan. The conspiracy theory that Keeley himself discusses involves a *botched* plot on the part of BAFT operatives first to foster and then to 'discover' the conspiratorial designs of Timothy McVeigh and his associates. It was not supposed to be part of the BAFT operatives' plan that the bomb would actually go off. (They wanted to pose as vigilant saviors of society by 'discovering' and defusing the bomb, thus restoring the battered reputation of the BAFT.) Hence to believe in this conspiracy theory is to believe in an absurd world in which sheer incompetence and hare-brained ambition play a major part in human affairs, leading to the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. This is not a comforting hypothesis. A universe **in** which some people have plans may still be a disconcertingly unplanned universe.

¹⁷ Clarke provides no evidence whatsoever for his claim that *conspiracy theories often have the appearance of forming the core of what Lakatos referred to as 'degenerating research programmes'*. Given the vast array of conspiracy theories accepted by all competent historians, this is as close to being self-evidently false as such a claim can be. The kindest construction to put upon Clarke's remarks is that he is thinking not of conspiracy theories in the sense that he accepts – theories which posit 'a secret plan on the part of [some] group to influence events partly by covert action' – but of high profile theories which are *stigmatized* as such; for instance, the theory that Elvis faked his own death. The only conspiracy theories that Clarke himself appears to believe in are the Iran-Contra and Watergate conspiracies. From this we can conclude that reading history is not his chief avocation.

Clarke

Why, this:

A program's good and ought to be believed
 If it's progressive; by the which I mean
 That what it prophesies doth come to pass
 (That is, when what it prophesies is new)
 And what it doth forbid that happens not.
 A program's bad ('degen'rate' as we say)
 If what it prophesies, that happens not,
 And what it doth forbid, why, that takes place.
 A theory's good if the new facts fit it;
 Bad if it must be bent to fit the facts¹⁸.

Coriolanus

If I suspect those politicians vile
 Conspired to bring me down, then my belief
 Concerns not what *will be* but what *has been*
 I prophesy nothing when I do assert
 The people were misled by demagogues

Clarke

Forgive me, noble lord if I misspoke.
 The 'prophesies' need not concern the future:
 They are sometimes conditional in form,
 As '*If we would do this, we would see that*'.
 Thus, '*if we did interrogate the men,*
 Who pass betwixt the tribunes and the plebs,
 They *would* admit that they had been set on
 To sway the populace to change their minds'.

Coriolanus

Why then is my belief 'degenerate'?

¹⁸ For more elaborate accounts of Lakatos's conception of **degenerating** research programs, see Lakatos (1978) *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, especially the Introduction and chs. 1, 2 & 3.

Have these suppos'd 'conditionals' proven false?
 I do not know the slimey go-betweens
 (I do not say 'the middlemen' because
 Extremes and middle are much less than men)
 That link the loathsome tribunes and the mob,
 Yet that there are such men I have no doubt.
 So many minds cannot have changed at once,
 All unpersuaded: and the base-born pair,
 Did not have time to do it on their own.
 Thus *if* we found the go-betweens, why then,
 We have good cause to think they *would* confess
 If I applied 'persuasion' on my part.
 But e'en if I am wrong, it has not yet
 Been tested. From the which I do conclude
 My 'program' is not yet degenerate.
 To be degen'rate is to fail a test
 And since it is a test I have not taken,
 Ergo it is a test I have not failed.

Clarke

Perhaps my lord you are in this correct.
 Not every fancied plot - maybe not most -
 Doth constitute the center and the core
 Of some degenerating research program
 Nonetheless ..

Coriolanus

How, 'nonetheless'?

Clarke

I do believe,
 It is a fault, an intellectual sin,
 To rashly postulate conspiracy.
 To do so indicates that you commit
 The fundamental attribution error.

Coriolanus

Why Sir, you've said a mouthful – what is that?
 If that your sense doth match your thund'rous sound,
 It cannot choose but be a grievous fault.

Clarke

A common crime, perhaps forgivable
 An error to the which we are all prone.
 Briefly it's this: we tend to give to men
 A greater share of causal influence
 Than they should rightly have: we do suppose,
 That we are not the slaves of circumstance¹⁹
 And that our actions do originate
 In our own wills and our own characters,
 Whereas research has shown it is not so.
 If men seem pious, why this is because,
 Their circumstances make for piety;
 If they seem villains, this then is the cause,
 Their circumstances make for villainy;
 And if courageous, then the reason is,
 Their circumstances make for bravery²⁰...

Coriolanus

This cannot be!

Clarke

But Sir, it truly is!
 As learned men have proved by many trials.

Coriolanus

¹⁹ Clarke, following Ross and Nisbet, talks of 'situations' I prefer 'circumstance' because the stress patterns make it difficult to fit 'situation' into an iambic pentameter.

²⁰ Thus Clarke: 'According to many social psychologists, humans systematically make the error of severely overestimating the importance of dispositional factors, as well as the concomitant error of severely underestimating the importance of situational factors, when seeking to understand and explain the behavior of others.'

What trials?

Clarke

Why, trials such as this²¹:

A set of young divines were set to preach
Uplifting sermons on true charity:
How we should help the stranger in our midst,
How hospitality doth please the gods,
How no man is an island, and how each,
Should help the other, though he knows him not²².

Coriolanus

What twaddling stuff is this!²³

Clarke

Sir, never mind!

The point is that these priestlings did believe,
And were about to preach what they believed
But yet they were informed of one thing more:
They all were told they were already late
To preach their sermons on sweet charity
And in their haste they none of them displayed
The virtue they were all prepared to preach.
A player was engaged to take the part
Of a sick man in need of urgent help
Who moaned and groaned beside the priestlings' path.
Most ignored him; some indeed o'er-leapt,
His suff'ring body slumped upon their road.

Coriolanus

What would you prove by this improving tale?

²¹ What follows, is, of course, a simplified account of the Dorley / Batson experiments.

²² This, I take it, is the message of the Parable of the Good Samaritan translated into a pagan idiom.

²³ The namby-pamby ethic of the Good Samaritan is not likely to appeal to the likes of Coriolanus.

Clarke

It is not character nor yet belief
 That makes men thus and so, but circumstance.
 The priestlings were in haste: that was enough
 To make them disregard the principles,
 They were about to teach. By which we see
 The fault, dear Marcius, lies not in ourselves,
 Nor in the stars but in the circumstance,
 That we are underlings²⁴ - or overlords.
 For we do act as all (or most) would act,
 Were they in the same circumstance as we.

Coriolanus

'Dear Marcius' am I not to such as you!
 But let that rest, for I would like to know
 What all this has to do with that vile plot
 By which the Tribunes drove me forth from Rome?

Clarke

My lord, in postulating such a plot,
 You magnify the men you would despise.²⁵
 If Brutus and Sicinius did the deed,
 Then they transcended circumstance and were
 The men whose mighty wills did move the state.
 It was *their* purposes that pushed you out,
 And *their* desires that sent you on your way.

²⁴ Paraphrased from *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 2.

²⁵ Marx makes a similar point in criticizing Victor Hugo's *Napoleon le Petit* in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 'Victor Hugo confines himself to bitter and witty invective against the responsible producer of the coup d'etat. The event itself appears in his work like a bolt from the blue. He sees in it only the violent act of a single individual. He does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative unparalleled in world history.' (Marx-Engels *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 394) Marx however, does not make Clarke's mistake. What is wrong with Hugo's account is not that he postulates a conspiracy on the part of Napoleon III (that such a conspiracy existed is historically undeniable) nor that he supposes the conspiracy to have been causally efficacious (it led to the establishment of the 'Second Empire' a regime which **lasted** for nearly twenty years). In Marx's view, Hugo falls down because he fails to explain the social and political circumstances that enabled the conspiracy of a petty intriguer like Napoleon III to have such a massive historical impact.

Most men are mostly slaves to circumstance,
 But if you 're right, it seems this 'petty pair',
 These 'Tritons of the minnows' as you say,
 Are less the slaves of circumstance than most,
 Making them mightier than they seem to be.
 In general, when we postulate a plot,
 We make too much of men and not enough
 Of circumstance, which, as the learned think,
 Is the great mover of the deeds of men.²⁶
 I do not say that men do never plot,
 Or that men plotting never do succeed,
 But I do say we are too prone to think
 That what is seldom so, is often so,
 Because we think that men the masters are,
 Of social circumstance; and not its slave.
That is the fault, the intellectual sin,
 'The fundamental attribution error'
 Of which, perhaps too pompously, I spoke.

Coriolanus

I will not recapitulate my case
 For thinking that those swine have done me wrong,
 Let me just say it seems a miracle,
 That all the plebs at once should change their minds,
 If they were not persuaded. Let me ask
 If you told *rabbits* that they were to preach
 A simpering sermon on 'sweet' charity,
 But that they all were late, what would they do?

²⁶ Thus Clarke: '*As explanations, conspiracy theories are highly dispositional. When conspiracies occur it is because conspirators intend them to occur and act on their intentions. The conspiratorial dispositions of the conspirators play the role of the cause in a typical explanation which involves a conspiracy. In most cases the received view, the conventionally accepted non-conspiratorial alternative to a particular conspiracy theory, is a situational explanation [my italics].*

Clarke

Rabbits, my noble lord?

Coriolanus

That's what I said.

If you put *rabbits* in the priestlings' place,
What would they do?

Clarke

Why, nothing, noble lord,
Except eat grass - and maybe lollop off.

Coriolanus

What about a brick?

Clarke

A brick my lord?

Coriolanus

Why yes, a brick. If it were told to preach
What would it do?

Clarke

Why, nothing much.
Rabbits at least can lollop, but a brick,
Being inanimate, is not inclined
To any course of action.

Coriolanus

So I thought.
But if you are correct, it seems to me.
The learned men you speak of must be wrong.
For they do think our acts originate
In social circumstance not human wills,
Yet if we put a rabbit in the place

Of the delinquent priestlings, it appears
 The rabbit would not act as they did act.
 Whence I conclude that social circumstance
 Is less omnipotent than they suppose,
 Since human dispositions are required,
 For human action to eventuate.
 The causal powers, so it seems to me,
 Are evenly divided, since we need
 Not only social circumstances but
 The causal qualities of humankind
 For priestlings not to practice what they preach.²⁷

Clarke

The point is not that social circumstance,
 Produces its effects without the aid
 Of human dispositions: **not** at all!
 The point is rather that the *differences*
 Between the acts of one man and the next
 Are not to be explained by character
 Or what they want or what they do believe,
 But by the circumstances that they face.
 And since the social circumstances make
 The difference between that man and this
 (Not human nature, which remains the same),
 When human action is to be explained,
 'Tis circumstance should take the centre stage.
 The fundamental attribution error
 Makes far too much of *individual* men,
 Their tastes, beliefs, desires and characters,
 And not enough of social circumstance;

²⁷ This argument disposes of the 'fundamental attribution error' as expounded by Clarke. It cannot be a mistake to attribute more to dispositional factors than situational factors if the behaviors in question would not arise without the aid of specifically human dispositions. Dispositional factors are *essential* in the explanation of human action even if the dispositions in question are not dispositions peculiar to individual human agents, but widely shared dispositions constitutive of human nature.

Which (with human nature) rules the roost²⁸.

Coriolanus

If that's the point, how then how am I at fault
In postulating base conspiracy?

Clarke

My lord, the plot in which you do believe,
Depends on characters (that you think base),
Peculiar to the two conspirators.
If action does not flow from character,
But circumstance and human nature both,
Plots that depend on special characters,
Are like not to be true. If circumstance
Makes all the difference 'twixt man and man,
Then theories that say otherwise are false:
Such is the theory that you do propose.
If plots derive from special characters,
And special characters do not exist,
Then nothing comes from that which nothing is
And your conspiracy melts into air.

Coriolanus

If you were right (as sure I think you're wrong)
And character played no part in our fate,
It would not follow that conspiracies,
Were brain-sick fancies based upon a myth.

²⁸ The fall-back conception of the 'fundamental attribution error' that I'm putting into the mouth of Clarke is similar to the one developed by Gilbert Harman in 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology'. 'The issue we have been concerned with is whether people differ in certain particular dispositions – character traits. To deny that people differ significantly in character traits is not to deny that they have any dispositions at all. People might well all share certain dispositions such as a disposition to make the fundamental attribution error'. See Harman (2000) *Explaining Value*, c.h. 10. p. 175. Earlier on he says 'The fact that two people regularly behave in different ways does not establish that they have different character traits. The differences may be due to their different situations rather than differences in their characters. To have different character traits, they must be disposed to act differently in the same circumstances (as they perceive those circumstances).' (Harman (2000), p. 167.) I take it that what Harman says *may* be the case – that 'differences may be due to their different situations rather than differences in their characters' – is what he thinks really is the case.

If I were (as I thank the gods I'm not,
 And as I think I truly cannot be)
 The base-born champion of the stinking plebs
 (A thought almost too foul to contemplate),
 My social situation would be this:
 I would perceive²⁹ the man that I did hate
 (Marcius that bloody mass of monstrous pride)
 Would fain destroy my power if he became
 Rome's consul; I would know the common folk
 Had all unwisely given him the power
 To disempower the tribunes and the plebs;
 I would perceive that I might have the chance
 To make them take back that too-mighty gift
 That he had just been granted. Knowing this,
 What would I do, if I, like many men,
 (I don't say 'all') desired security
 And the continuance of present power?
 Why then I would command my go-betweens
 To go rouse up the people: to take back
 The gift of voices fondly thrown away
 Upon a proud and stiff-necked enemy.
 This would I do because of circumstance,
 The circumstance, that is, that I perceive,
 And dispositions base that I would share
 With many other men. From which we see
 That when we postulate conspiracy,
 We need not think that special characters,
 That differ between one man and the next,
 Push on the plotters to concoct their plot.
 I can concede that sovereign circumstance
 Makes all the difference 'twixt man and man,
 But still believe that some men sometimes plot

²⁹ Harman is very clear that the social circumstance that moves us is the social circumstance that we perceive. It is because they *think* they are late not because they *are* late that the Dorley/Batson seminarians jump over the prostrate, groaning body. It is because they *believe* that they are administering electric shocks not because they *are* administering electric shocks that Milgram's subjects are often so distressed.

Because the circumstances that they face
 Differ from those of non-conspirators.
 Not many men are tribunes of the plebs,
 That have their voices yielded up to me,
 Hence few have done what that base pair have done,
 But many men would act as they did act,
 If they were placed as that vile pair were placed.
 Thus, if we are the slaves of circumstance
 (Since circumstance makes all the difference
 Between the different acts of different men),
 It does not follow that men do not plot.
 Hence, I commit no intellectual crime
 When I suspect a vile conspiracy.
 But there is more...

Clarke

What more my lord?

Coriolanus

Why, this:

Your learned men, I say, are learned fools³⁰
 If they do think that social circumstance
 (Even the circumstance that they 'perceive')
 Makes all the difference 'twixt man and man.
 It is not true that men are all alike:
 Men differ much in what they do desire,

³⁰ Social psychologists are professionally committed to studying the dispositions that we share (if they were not they would be *individual* not *social* psychologists). It would be too much to say that they are professionally blind to individual differences, but these are things they tend to overlook. Social situations in which individual differences make all the difference – the committee meetings of political parties for instance – are situations about which they have nothing much to say; and consequently situations about which they don't say very much. It is human nature – one of the dispositions that we share – to overestimate the importance of one's own peculiar concerns. Since social psychologists are professionally focused on the dispositions that we have in common, they must perforce resort to circumstance to explain the differences in the ways we behave. But it is silly to infer that *most* of the differences in the ways that we behave are due to differences in the perceived situation from the fact that in *some* circumstances (such as the Dorley / Batson experiments) we tend to behave alike. It is even sillier to make this inference on the basis of the Milgram experiments, in which a sizeable minority refused to obey, (It seems that about 35% are *not* prepared to torture someone to death on the say-so of a man in a white coat.) Since the subjects face the same situation, it seems that the differences in the way that they behave are due to different dispositions. But if we often act differently because of different dispositions, then the fundamental attribution error is not an error.

In what they like and what they do dislike,
 In what they do admire and what despise.
 Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
 Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
 And others, when the bagpipe sings i' the nose,
 Cannot contain their urine: for affection,
 Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
 Of what it likes or loathes.³¹ When circumstance
 Is much the same for one man and the next,
 It is affection makes the difference,
 Since we are not affected all alike.
 In battle, some men fight and some men flee,
 Since some men think brave death outweighs bad life,³²
 Whilst others think that any life outweighs
 Harsh death, however brave or honorable;
 Some men do think it were an easy leap,
 To pluck bright honor from the pale-faced Moon³³,
 Whilst others think that honor is but air³⁴
 (Such souls of geese that bear the shapes of men).³⁵
 In counsel, some are silent, some speak up;
 Some men prefer to follow, some to lead;
 And when the King's a child and the next heir
 Is Regent and Protector of the State,
 Some men would kill their kin to gain a crown,
 And buy a kingdom with a nephew's blood³⁶,
 Whilst other uncles, other kin of Kings.
 Although they face the self-same circumstance,
 Prefer their kin to Kingship and disdain
 To cut a Kingly throat to gain a throne³⁷.

³¹ Shylock's speech explaining (or rather failing to explain) his hatred of Antonio in William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 1.

³² *Coriolanus*, Act I, Scene 4.

³³ For instance, Hotspur, *Henry IV, Part 1*, Act I, Scene 3.

³⁴ For instance, Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 1*, Act V, Scene 1.

³⁵ *Coriolanus*, Act I, Scene 4.

³⁶ For example, Richard, Duke of Gloucester in *Richard III*, uncle to Edward V.

³⁷ For example, John, Duke of Bedford, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester in *Henry VI, Parts 1 & 2*, uncles to Henry VI.

Whence it appears that social circumstance
 Is not always what makes the difference
 Between the acts of one man and the next.
 Now hear this ..

Clarke

My ears are open, good my lord.

Coriolanus

That's very fine, since I have heard you out,
 Though you did say my theory formed the core
 Of a degenerating research program;
 Though you did make my bravery a thing
 Solely of circumstance; and did suggest
 That th' base plot by which I was o'erthrown
 Was nothing but a figment of my fancy;
 That to believe it was a kind of crime
 ('the fundamental attribution error').

Well!

We now have seen the errors are all yours,
 That my belief the tribunes did conspire
 Was nothing in the least degenerate;
 That courage whether mine or any man's
 Is never solely due to circumstance;
 That even if it were, and circumstance
 Made all the difference 'twixt man and man,
 It would not follow that men never plot,
 Or that the tribunes base did not conspire.
 In thinking that they did, I did not make
 'The fundamental attribution error',
 For it appears that actions often flow
 From our desires, dislikes and dispositions,
 In which we differ, one man from the next.
 Thus if I make the tribunes' appetites,
 (Desires they do no share with better men)

The cause and origin of their vile plot,
 This is no sin, no intellectual crime,
 Since men are often moved by appetites,
 Which go unshared by others. Thus it seems
 There's nothing fond or foolish, nothing wrong
 In postulating base conspiracy.

But now, good Sirs, Good Day, I've had enough,
 I have not time to listen to such stuff.
 I have revenge to plot; I would strike home
 'Gainst those base slaves that drove me forth from Rome.

(*Exuent Omnes.*)

Part 2: A Modern Superstition

It is now time to cast aside the mask of Coriolanus and to philosophize in *propria persona*. I shall be dealing in facts that Coriolanus could not possibly have known and anachronism can only be pushed so far before it begins to grate. I shall be arguing that the idea that there is something intellectually suspect about conspiracy theories *as such* – which is presupposed by the use of ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ as generalized terms of intellectual abuse – is simply a superstition; indeed one of the most idiotic and dangerous superstitions of the present age.

First some definitions. A conspiracy is a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly covert action. I will add the proviso that either the plan or the action must be morally suspect, at least to some people. We do not say that the executives of Mazda conspired to bring out a new model Familia, even if the operation was shrouded in secrecy, though we might say that the executives of the Ford Motor company conspired to bring out the Pinto. The reason is that, unless there is something wrong with it, there is nothing morally suspect about bringing out a new model motor car. We are inclined to talk of conspiracy in the case of the Pinto, because there *was* something wrong with it. The Pinto suffered from a defect that Ford should have either rectified or revealed - it was inclined to explode if rear-ended. My proviso is not meant to exclude the possibility of what Hume calls

‘conspiracies in the public interest’³⁸ since in my book what is morally suspect need not be morally wrong. A conspiracy, then, is a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly covert action. A conspiracy *theory* is a theory which posits such a plan. A conspiracy *theorist*, therefore, is someone who subscribes to a conspiracy *theory*.

Now for the consequence. Every historically and politically literate person is a conspiracy theorist on a grand scale, though many ‘intellectuals’, politicians and political commentators are apparently unaware of the fact. Why so? Because history records a vast number of conspiracies - that is secret plans to influence events by partly covert means - that are not seriously in doubt. And most of these plans are morally suspect, at least to some people. Hence if you believe that our history books are substantially correct, you must believe in a great many conspiracy theories. The nightly news and the daily newspapers tell the same tale. Much of what we read about cannot be explained without resorting to conspiracy, and there are many conspiracy theories that are not seriously in doubt. For example, it is not seriously disputed even by the most rabid foes of US policy, that the events of 9/11 were due to a conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda. Some may suspect complicity on the part of Mossad or sinister US agencies, but most believe that it was al-Qaeda that did the deed. And *nobody* half-way sane supposes that the events of 9/11 were not due to some conspiracy or other. (To think *that* you would have to suppose that the perpetrators assembled in the planes quite by chance and that on a sudden, by coincidence, it struck them all as neat idea to hijack the planes and ram them into the Twin Towers, the Whitehouse and the Pentagon, with the aid of other perpetrators who, presumably, they had never met before.) Thus, unless you think that nightly news is not merely misguided, biased or selective but a pack of lies from start to finish, you are pretty well bound to be a conspiracy theorist. (And, of course, if you think *that* - i.e. that the nightly news *is* a pack of lies from start to finish - you are again a conspiracy theorist, though of a different and rather more paranoid kind.)

Let us start with History. In the electronic edition of the *Collected Works and Correspondence* of David Hume³⁹, the word ‘conspiracy’ occurs 191 times, the word

³⁸ Hume David (1985) *Essays, Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, p. 587.

³⁹ Past Masters, Intalex@Corporation, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1-57085-044-5

'conspiracies', 45 times, the word 'conspirators', 70 times, 'conspirator', 12 times, 'conspired', twice, 'conspire', 11 times, 'conspired', 23 times, 'conspird' (a misspelling of 'conspired'), twice, 'conspiring', 8 times, 'plot' 94 times, 'plots', 9 times, 'plotted' twice, and 'ploter' (a rather amusing variant of 'plotter'), three times. Concentrating on the word 'conspiracy', about three come from editors or correspondents such as Lady Hervey, and about ten concern the crazy theory, hatched in the paranoid brain of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that 'd'Alembert, Horace Walpole, and [Hume had] entered into a Conspiracy against him to lead him into England, and ruin him, by settling him in a most commodious and agreeable Manner, and by doubling his Income'⁴⁰. There are four casual uses of 'conspiracy' in the *Essays* and *The Natural History of Religion*, in which Hume alludes to a historical conspiracy before going on to make some other historical, sociological or philosophical point. For example: 'That bloody debauchee [the Emperor Commodus] being murdered by a **conspiracy** suddenly formed between his wench and her gallant, who happened at that time to be *Praetorian Praefect*; these immediately deliberated about choosing a master to human kind'⁴¹ There are several occurrences of 'conspiracy' in Hume's letters to his fellow historian, William Robertson, in which he discusses (on the basis of state papers, intercepted correspondence and the like) the complicity of Mary, Queen of Scots in various conspiracies against her husband, Lord Darnley, her cousin, Elizabeth I and her son, James VI: 'I am afraid, that you, as well as myself, have drawn Mary's character with too great softenings. She was undoubtedly a violent woman at all times. You will see in Murden proofs of the utmost rancour against her innocent, good-natured, dutiful son. She certainly disinherited him. What think you of a **conspiracy** for kidnapping him, and delivering him a prisoner to the King of Spain, never to recover his liberty till he should turn Catholic?'⁴² However, the vast bulk of the uses of 'conspiracy' occur in Hume's six volume *History of England*, long regarded as a standard work. And in most of these uses Hume is simply recounting in a matter-of-fact way the conspiracies he finds in his sources: 'A secret conspiracy was entered into to perpetrate in one day a general massacre of the Normans, like that which had formerly been executed upon the Danes..' (*History*, vol. 1, p. 195); 'A conspiracy of his [that is, William II's] own barons, which was detected at this time, appeared a

⁴⁰ Greig ed. (1932b) *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 2, Letter 358 to Suard, p. 103.

⁴¹ Hume David (1985) *Essays, Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, p. 483, 'Of the Original Contract'.

⁴² Greig ed. (1932a) *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, Letter 162 to Robertson, p. 229

more serious concern, and engrossed all his attention. (*History*, vol. 1, p. 234); ‘A conspiracy was entered into to seize the person of the empress; and she saved herself from the danger by a precipitate retreat. She fled to Oxford..’ (*History*, vol. 1, p. 292); ‘The earls of Rutland, Kent, and Huntingdon, and lord Spencer, who were now degraded from the respective titles of Albemarle, Surrey, Exeter, and Gloucester, conferred on them by Richard, entered into a **conspiracy**, together with the earl of Salisbury and lord Lumley, for raising an insurrection, and for seizing the king’s [that is Henry IV’s] person at Windsor; but the treachery of Rutland gave him warning of the danger...’ (*History*, vol. 2, p. 335);⁴³ ‘But while Henry [that is Henry V] was meditating conquests upon his neighbours, he unexpectedly found himself in danger from a **conspiracy** at home, which was happily detected in its infancy. The earl of Cambridge ...’ (*History*, vol. 2, p. 362)⁴⁴. I quote at length since the mere occurrence of ‘conspiracy’ in a history does not entail that a conspiracy theory is actually being endorsed. (Hume could have been writing endless variations on ‘There was a conspiracy – NOT!’) It is true that Hume sometimes talks of pretended or false conspiracies, such as the notorious Popish Plot of Titus Oates. But even in these cases, the fabricated plot was often being used to facilitate a real plot or plots. Thus in the case of Titus Oates, the Whigs were certainly plotting to undermine what they saw as the dangerously arbitrary power of Charles II; their plans were at least semi-secret and employed partly covert means (such a building up a private army of ‘brisk boys from Wapping’); and they went on to develop a fully-fledged, if, in the end, disastrously unsuccessful conspiracy (or set of conspiracies), known (collectively) as the Rye House Plot⁴⁵. Hume recounts the bogus conspiracy theory propounded by Charles IX, King of France: ‘Charles, in order to cover this barbarous perfidy, pretended, that a **conspiracy** of the hugonots to seize his person had been suddenly detected; and that he had been necessitated, for his own defence, to proceed to this severity against them.’ (*History*, vol. 4, p. 163.) But the barbarous perfidy in question was the *real* conspiracy, on the part of Charles and his associates, that led to the massacre of thousands of his Protestant (‘hugonot’) subjects on St Bartholomew’s Eve, 1572⁴⁶, ‘five hundred gentlemen and men of rank ... and near

⁴³ This episode is dramatized by Shakespeare in *Richard II*, Act V, Scenes 2-3.

⁴⁴ This episode is dramatized by Shakespeare in *Henry V*, Act II, Scenes 2

⁴⁵ The plot was discovered, many of the ring-leaders were executed, whilst some of their associates such as John Locke, who seems to have been in some degree an accessory, were forced into exile.

⁴⁶ I have read recent histories which allege that Charles was not quite as perfidious as Hume believed him to be, and that he was monstered into endorsing the Massacre at the last moment. Even if this is true, it does not mean that the Massacre was *not* the result of a conspiracy, only that it was a more haphazard affair than Hume supposed, and that the roles of the conspirators have to be redistributed.

ten thousand of inferior condition’.

Thus David Hume (like everyone else who has written a large scale history of England, or, for that matter, almost any other country) was a dedicated and prolific conspiracy theorist. And this is all the more remarkable, since he was also a fully paid-up member of the Scottish Enlightenment, a pioneer of the thesis for which the Enlightenment Scots were famous: that history is the product of human action not of human design, that although people pursue their own purposes, they are often led by an invisible hand to promote ends which are no part of their intention, and that human institutions, though artificial, are generally the products of an evolutionary process rather than of anybody’s conscious intentions. If even *Hume* routinely posits conspiracy theories, then conspiracy theories are hardly incompatible with methodological sophistication.

The moral of the story is this. History, as we know it from the original documents, and as it is recorded by the best historians, is shot through with conspiracy. If, as the modern superstition has it, conspiracy theories *per se* are crazy suspect, disreputable, or unbelievable, then history as we know it is bunk – that is crazy, suspect, disreputable, or unbelievable. The vast bulk of what we think we know about the history of England, as of many other countries, would be too systematically tainted with conspiracy to command belief. But history is *not* bunk – by and large, it is neither crazy, suspect, disreputable, or unbelievable. Hence the modern superstition *is* a superstition, and there is nothing crazy, suspect, disreputable, or unbelievable about conspiracy theories *per se* – though, of course, *some* conspiracy theories are crazy, suspect, disreputable, or unbelievable.

Indeed it seems to me we that we can employ a variant of Keeley’s chief argument against the superstition that he indirectly supports. If conspiracy theories are systematically suspect, then what we think we know about the past is systematically suspect. The memoirs, the annals and the testimonies on which we rely – and in many cases the confessions and correspondence of the conspirators – would have to be regarded with suspicion. But if we adopted that attitude, our knowledge of the past would dissolve into conjecture. We would, in effect, be committing epistemic suicide, at least with respect to large chunks of the past. If, as Keeley suggests, this would be a Bad Thing To Do, then we cannot afford to suppose

that conspiracy theories are systematically suspect. Indeed, if we *did* suppose this we would be in the bizarre position of not being allowed to believe that documents such as the conspiratorial correspondence of Mary, Queen of Scots *had been forged* since that would entail another conspiracy. Instead we would have to entertain the conjecture that her conspiratorial correspondence had somehow written itself.

So much for history, what about the nightly news? Most acts of terrorism and/or guerilla warfare⁴⁷ presuppose a conspiracy. If Ahmed, Mahmoud and Ali plan to blow up a humvee full of Marines, they cannot afford to advertise the fact. Both the plotting and the planting of the bomb must be secret if their plan is to succeed. Of course, some terrorists and/or guerilla warriors may be 'lone gunmen', but generally speaking, terrorism and/or guerrilla warfare are collective enterprises. Thus if you have heard about the 'insurgency' in Iraq and don't suppose that all those bombs planted themselves, it follows that you are a conspiracy theorist, though perhaps a rather vague and unspecific one. Again although, there are definitely some 'lone gunmen', many, perhaps most, political assassinations are the products of conspiracy⁴⁸. It may be that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone when he shot President Kennedy, but the very big bomb that killed ex-Premier Rafik Hariri of the Lebanon was almost certainly a collaborative effort. Gavrilo Princip, whose assassination of the Arch-Duke Franz-Ferdinand touched off World War I, was part of a conspiratorial group ('the Black Hand'), as were the honorable men who with their daggers did stab Caesar. If you want to mount a *coup d'etat*, the current President had better be kept out of the loop, and it is much better if you can secure control of the Presidential Place *before* anyone raises the alarm. A *coup d'etat*, therefore, is bound to be a conspiratorial business. Hence, anyone who believes that there are such things as *coups*, is, ipso facto, a conspiracy theorist. The same goes for rebellions. If your rebellion is going to get off the ground, the current government had better not know about it, or the rebellion is likely to be suppressed in its cradle. Not many revolutions happen without somebody somewhere doing a little bit of

⁴⁷ In my view these classes overlap though neither includes the other. Not every terrorist is a guerilla warrior and not every guerilla warrior is a terrorist. There are state terrorists a-plenty who are not guerrilla warriors and there are guerrilla warriors who take reasonable precautions not to kill civilians and are consequently not terrorists.

⁴⁸ I reviewed the high-profile political assassinations of late Sixteenth and early Seventeenth Century Europe, an age noted for its propensity for political murder. Surprisingly, about half were due to 'lone gunmen', though in some cases the 'gun' was a sword or a dagger. The rest were the products of conspiracy.

conspiring⁴⁹. State terror, likewise, tends to be a conspiratorial affair. One of the most hideous phenomena of recent years is that of ‘disappearances’. In places like Guatemala and El Salvador (and in other parts of the world too) many thousands of people have been ‘disappeared’, that is, they have been arrested or kidnapped by the secret police or their vigilante allies, and hustled off to a secret prison or a shallow grave (or perhaps a secret prison and *then* a shallow grave). You can’t let people know that you are coming if you plan to ‘disappear’ them and whatever you do subsequently is, almost by definition, secret. Torture, nowadays is rather frowned upon, so, if you plan to torture people, you had better do it on the sly. That is why President Bush’s program of ‘extraordinary rendition’, by which the CIA has⁵⁰ been authorized to kidnap terrorism suspects and transport them to foreign parts where they can be tortured with impunity, is based on a ‘still-classified’ *secret* directive and has, until recently, been kept a secret from anyone except news junkies and human rights fetishists. (And who cares about *them* anyway?). Corruption, too, tends to be conspiratorial affair. If you want to buy a judge, you had better not announce it in the newspapers and the judge herself would be well advised to cultivate a certain discretion. Even in the relatively sedate world of parliamentary politics, conspiracy is not uncommon. In a parliamentary ‘spill’, where the leader of a democratic party is overthrown, there is usually a good deal of secret plotting and clandestine feeling out of potential supporters before the dissidents challenge the leader openly.

Conspiracy, in short, is endemic in political life, a fact that should be fairly obvious to anyone who bothers to read the newspapers or watch the nightly news. Hence most politically literate people are conspiracy theories on a grand scale (since they believe in a large number of conspiracy theories) though many of them, so it seems, are unaware of it.

We are now in a position to turn the tables on Clarke. Clarke argues that

⁴⁹ I don’t say *none*. There does not seem to have been much secret plotting involved in the ‘orange’ revolution in the Ukraine, and the power of Ceaucescu in Rumania seems to have evaporated like morning mist once everybody ceased to believe in it.

⁵⁰ See ‘Rule Change Lets C.I.A. Freely Send Suspects Abroad to Jails’ By Douglas Jehl and David Johnston, *New York Times* 6/3/05. Of course, the claim is that guarantees have been given that the suspects would not be tortured, but it is hard to see why you would fly people to foreign parts to be interrogated by known torturers unless you wanted them to be tortured. The idea that the whole thing was just a *cost-cutting* exercise - ‘an alternative to what American officials have said is the costly, manpower-intensive process of housing them in the United States or in American-run facilities - is a lie so ridiculous that it is hard to believe that they could find a ‘senior United States official’ with the bare-faced gall to repeat it.

conspiracy theories are intellectually suspect for two reasons: 1) they typically constitute the cores of degenerating research programs; and 2) they typically attribute too much causal influence to human dispositions and not enough to the social situation; hence they commit the fundamental attribution error. As should by now be obvious 1) is simply absurd. It is just plain false that most conspiracy theories typically constitute the cores of degenerating research programs. But setting aside the subtleties of Coriolanus, we can now see that there is something wrong with 2) too. Clarke insinuates that it is anti-scientific - i.e. that it flies in the face of evidence and experience - to doubt the situationist opinions of the social psychologists. But given the abundant evidence of conspiracy, we are now in a position to pose a dilemma. Either situationism entails that conspiracies are unlikely or it does not. If it does, then, given the abundant evidence that conspiracies are common, situationism is *false*, notwithstanding the experimental results of the social psychologists. (To deny this is to fly in the face of evidence and experience, in this case as represented by history.) If, on the other hand, situationism does *not* entail that conspiracies are uncommon, then Clarke has not come within cooe of vindicating the superstition of the intellectuals, that believing in conspiracy theories *per se* is somehow irrational.

Let us take one of these 'intellectuals', namely, Tony Blair (he is, after all an Oxford man). According to David Coady, in the months before the war in Iraq, Blair dismissed accusations that the war would be fought in pursuit of oil as mere 'conspiracy theories'. In using 'conspiracy theories' as a term of political abuse, Blair was, of course, subscribing to the intellectuals' superstition. The implied claim was not that *these* conspiracy theories were false, but that these theories were false *because they were conspiracy theories*. Yet, during this very period – and for some time thereafter – the foreign policy of the United Kingdom and the United States was officially based on no less than *three* conspiracy theories, one true and the other two false.

- 1) That the events of 9/11 were due to a conspiracy on the part of al-Quaeda (who were themselves in league with the Taliban).
- 2) That the regime of Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with al-Quaeda,

making him in some sense an accessory to the events of 9/11⁵¹.

- 3) That the regime of Saddam Hussein had *successfully* conspired to evade the UN inspectors and had acquired (or retained) weapons of mass destruction and perhaps was on the way (via the acquisition of yellowcake from Niger) to gaining a nuclear capability, thus making the regime a clear and present danger both to the UK and the US⁵².

Given that Bush and Blair were trumpeting these conspiracy theories morning, noon and night, how can Blair have had the bare-faced insolence to suggest that conspiracy theories *as such* are intellectually suspect? (And how come nobody was smart enough to pick him up on it?) Perhaps this is a silly question to ask about Blair, a statesman whose capacity for self-deception is evidently boundless. A man who could convince himself that Iraq posed *a serious danger* to the security of the United Kingdom would be unlikely to have any trouble overlooking a little thing like a latent inconsistency. But this sort of thing is so common, that one is tempted think that the perpetrators must mean something *else* by a conspiracy theory than *a theory which posits a secret and morally suspect plan to influence events by partly covert means*. For example, I remember reading an article in the New York Times in which the journalists, after reeling off a set of (reasonably plausible) conspiracy theories about who was behind the Iraqi insurrection, noted, with some condescension, that the Iraqi policemen they were interviewing were preoccupied with conspiracy theories about the reasons for the American invasion. That this was a case of pots and kettles obviously did not occur to them. So is there a plausible reading of ‘*conspiracy theory*’ which would justify the rhetorical stance of people like Blair and the snooty attitude of those New York Times journalists? Such a reading would have to meet three conditions:

⁵¹ **Lynne Jones:** A moment ago my right hon. Friend said that the association between Iraq and terrorists is loose, yet last night President Bush told the American people that Iraq has aided, trained and harboured terrorists, including operatives of al-Qaeda. Was President Bush accurate in what he told the American people? **The Prime Minister:** [...] Secondly, to my hon. Friend, yes, I do support what the President said. Do not be in any doubt at all—Iraq has been supporting terrorist groups. Hansard 18/3/03 [Note however, the evasiveness of the answer: it is one thing to say that Saddam had been supporting terrorist groups another to say that he had been **supporting al-Qaeda.**]

⁵² **Prime Minister** We are now just four days into this conflict. It is worth restating our central objectives. They are to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and to ensure that IRAQ is disarmed of all chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programmes, but in achieving these objectives we have also embraced other considerations ... **Hansard** 24/3/05. This, of course presupposes that Saddam *had* weapons programs worth disarming and that they were sufficiently dangerous to make war a necessity.

- i) it would have to *exclude* hypotheses such as Blair's theories 1), 2) & 3) – these must not count as conspiracy theories under the new dispensation;
- ii) it would have to *include* theories such as those of Blair's opponents and the Iraqi policemen; and
- iii) it would have to be such that conspiracy theories in this sense were obviously faulty or foolish.

Perhaps Keeley might be of assistance. Perhaps what Blair & Co. mean by 'a conspiracy theory' is something like what Keeley means by an *unwarranted* conspiracy theory? According to Keeley, a conspiracy theory is an unwarranted conspiracy theory (or a UCT) if it displays some of the following features: (1) it runs counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account, (2) it postulates nefarious intentions on the part of the plotters, (3) it ties together seemingly unrelated events (a heinous crime this!) and/or (4) the truths behind the events explained are well-guarded secrets, even though the perpetrators may be well-known public figures. Unfortunately if we interpret 'conspiracy theory' as 'unwarranted conspiracy theory' (in Keeley's sense) we get an interpretation that fails conditions i) and iii). It fails condition i) because it does not exclude the Blair conspiracy theories. The Blair conspiracy theories 2) and 3) *did* run counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account, namely that of Saddam Hussein, according to which he was *not* in contact with al-Qaeda and did *not* have any WMDs. They *did* postulate nefarious intentions on the part of plotters, namely the intention on the part of Saddam's government to assist al-Qaeda and acquire WMDs. They *did* tie together seemingly unrelated events (since they were based on circumstantial evidence). And they *did* suppose that the truths behind the events to be explained were well-guarded secrets, since Blair and Bush could not actually *prove* the existence of links with al-Qaeda or the existence of WMD's (as it turned out, for the simple reason that there were no such things). Thus Blair's conspiracy theories were unwarranted in Keeley's sense, which means that this suggested definition fails condition i). It also fails condition iii) since, as the other contributors have abundantly proved, what Keeley calls UCTs are not obviously faulty or foolish.

But there is, I think, no need to spin this out. It is pretty clear from the contexts what Blair and the New York Times journalists *really* mean by 'a conspiracy theory' and it is clear

that this reading meets two of my requirements. What they really mean by a conspiracy theory is *a theory which posits a secret and morally suspect plan on the part of Western governments or government agencies to influence events by partly covert means*. This excludes conspiracy theories 1), 2) & 3) since the supposed plotters were not Western governments or Western government agencies. Thus the reading meets condition i). The reading *includes* the conspiracy theory of Blair's opponents since that theory attributes morally suspect intentions to the governments of the USA and the UK. (If the war was fought for oil, it was not quite the noble-minded crusade for international security that it was cracked up to be.) And since most Iraqis are pretty cynical about American intentions it probably includes the theories of the Iraqi policemen as well. Hence it meets condition ii). But the reading falls at the last fence since it fails to meet condition iii). *Theories which posit secret and morally suspect plans on the part of Western governments or government agencies to influence events by partly covert means* are not obviously foolish or faulty. And the reason is that many such theories are by now established facts whilst others are highly plausible.

Even Clarke and Keeley admit to the Watergate affair and the Iran/Contra scandal, though that is about as far as their historical reading seems to have gone. But there are many more well-attested and morally suspect conspiracies on the part of Western governments or government agencies of which they are apparently ignorant. Let's start with the amazing conspiracy on the part of FBI operatives to wreck the marriages of civil rights activists by sending them anonymous letters suggesting adulterous goings on (hard to believe but true)⁵³. Or what about the cable of 24/8/63 sent to the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, telling him, in effect, to start organizing a conspiracy against Ngo Dinh Diem and his (admittedly appalling) brother Nhu?⁵⁴ It is true that Diem was a nasty piece of work, but he was an ally, the nearest thing South Vietnam had to an elected leader, and the plot to depose him led to two horrible murders and a military dictatorship. You can argue, perhaps that it was morally justified in the great scheme of things but it was morally suspect, to say the least. And then there are the secret and illegal Menu bombings in Cambodia instigated by Nixon and Kissinger, a series of attacks on a neutral country resulting in many civilian casualties⁵⁵. More recently, there is plenty

⁵³ See Richard M. Fried, (1990) *Nightmare in Red*, pp. 190-191

⁵⁴ See Robert McNamara (1996) *In Retrospect*, pp. 52-61.

⁵⁵ See William Shawcross (1986) *Sideshow*, ch. 1.

of evidence that members of the Bush administration have winked at torture. Very telling, to my mind, is the information that some prisoners have been concealed from the Red Cross and Human Rights Watch. Now why would you conceal prisoners from the human rights watchdogs, if you did not want to violate their human rights?

But there is no need to belabor the point. Western governments and government agencies have engaged in morally dodgy conspiracies. Hence theories which say that they engage in morally dodgy conspiracies are not obviously faulty or foolish.

So what is the upshot? The idea that conspiracy theories *as such* are somehow intellectually suspect is a superstitious or irrational belief, since there is no reason whatsoever to think it true. It is an *idiotic* superstition since a modicum of critical reflection reveals that it is false. And it is *dangerous* superstition since it invests the lies, evasions and self-deceptions of torturers and warmongers with a spurious air of methodological sophistication. So, if somebody pooh-poohs a conspiracy theory of yours simply because it *is* a conspiracy theory, then you know that that person is either a knave or a fool or, quite likely, an unlovely combination of the two.