

## POPPER REVISITED

Or

### WHAT IS WRONG WITH CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Conspiracy theories are widely deemed to be superstitious. Yet history appears to be littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise. (For this reason 'cock-up' theories cannot in general replace conspiracy theories since in many cases the cock-ups are simply failed conspiracies.) Why then is it silly to suppose that historical events are sometimes due to conspiracy? The only argument known to me is due to Sir Karl Popper who criticizes what he calls 'the conspiracy theory of society' in *The Open Society* and elsewhere. His critique of the conspiracy theory is indeed sound. But it is a theory no sane person maintains. Moreover its falsehood is compatible with the prevalence of conspiracies. Nor do his arguments create any *presumption* against conspiracy theories of this or that. Thus the belief that it is superstitious to posit conspiracies is itself a superstition. The paper concludes with some speculations as to this superstition is so widely believed.

#### 1. Conspiracies, Cock-Ups and Sir Karl Popper

Conspiracy theories are widely deemed to be superstitious. To suggest, for example, that New Zealand's lurch to the right is due to a conspiracy between leading politicians, the Treasury and big business is to invite the shaking of heads and pitying looks from sophisticated colleagues. Everybody *knows* that that is not the way history works. Yet on the face of it, the evidence points the other way. History is littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise. The reign of Elizabeth I, for instance, reads like a catalogue of conspiracies - the Ridolfi plot, the Throckmorton plot the Babington plot etc. - and the Queen herself was no stranger to conspiratorial intrigue. So why is it so silly to believe in conspiracies? After all, the rival 'theory' often proposed<sup>1</sup> - the cock-up theory of history - presupposes a conspiracy or at least a plan. If I am not trying to do something, I can't cock it up. In other words, you cannot substitute cock-ups for conspiracies in the explanation of events. In many cases the cock-ups simply *are* failed conspiracies (Think of Watergate!) and when they are not, they are failed endeavours of some other kind. (Though to be fair, the term 'cock-up' is sometimes used to cover the disastrous consequences of a policy of drift and indecision on the part of the powers that be.) The fact that conspiracies and cock-

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance by Bernard Ingham, press secretary to Mrs. Thatcher. According to him the cock-up theory is far more fruitful in the interpretation of events. 'Many journalists have fallen for the conspiracy theory of government. I do assure you that they would produce more accurate work if they adhered to the cock-up theory.' (Quoted in the *Otago Daily Times*, 3/4/85.) The puzzle here is why Mr. Ingham should have supposed (as he evidently did) that this was a *comforting* thought.

ups are not incompatible should be obvious from the case of *criminal* conspiracies. If I were charged with a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, I would not get off just because the judge did not take the bribe, the witnesses could not be intimidated or the CIA refused to obstruct the FBI. Even those who look down their noses at conspiracy theories often laud the conspiratorial activities of their own particular heroes (though not under that description). Plotting and covert action were both required to win World War II. To admire Churchill, therefore, is to admire a successful conspirator.

So why is it naive to believe in conspiracy theories? What is the *argument* that reduces these solid considerations to nothingness?

The argument, such as it is, derives from Popper. In the *Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2. pp. 94-99<sup>2</sup>, Popper denounces what he calls 'the conspiracy theory of society'. And it is this denunciation that I intend to discuss. Oddly enough I may be the first in the field. For although standard texts in the philosophy of history often read like extended commentaries on Collingwood and Popper, his critique of 'the conspiracy theory' seems to have been neglected.

Like many on the left, I think Popper's critique of conspiracy theories has provided right-wing conspirators (and in some cases their agents) with an intellectually respectable smokescreen behind which they can conceal their conspiratorial machinations.<sup>3 4</sup> Consider,

---

<sup>2</sup> The same arguments are repeated with very minor variations in ' in Popper, 1972a, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition', pp. 123-4. Similar arguments are deployed on pages 341-2 in the essay 'Prediction or Prophecy', but there they are used to support a rather stronger conclusion than the one defended in the *Open Society*.

<sup>3</sup> This view is shared for instance by the writers of the BBC serial *The Edge of Darkness*. When the sinister Jerry Grogan, chief of the Fusion Corporation of Kansas is taxed with some of his conspiratorial activities, he suavely replies, 'I don't believe in the conspiracy theory of society'.

<sup>4</sup> Of course the Right (even the vaguely democratic Right) has not always been so skeptical about conspiracies. Witness Senator McCarthy. And even today there are old-fashioned right-wingers who take a less skeptical line. For example, Ronald Reagan. 'Oh those demonstrations,' he said of the monster marches of CND and kindred organizations. 'They are all sponsored by a thing called the World Peace Council which is bought and paid for by the Soviet Union.' (See E.P. Thompson, 1982, *Zero Option*, p. ix.) But nowadays a refined skepticism is the more fashionable pose. My guess is that for every conspiracy alleged by the Reagan/Bush administration at least two would have been denied. Nobody, I am sure, would have been so base as to run both lines simultaneously, a principled skepticism when their own conspiracies were at issue and a firm dogmatism about the conspiracies of Commies, pinkos, peaceniks and the like.

for example, this response of Sir Robert Armstrong the British Cabinet Secretary during the famous *Spycatcher* Trial in New South Wales:

*Question* (Malcolm Turnbull): Now Sir Robert, you and the Prime Minister and the Security Service agreed to let Pincher write his book about Hollis [*Their Trade is Treachery*] so that the affair would come out in the open through the pen of a safely conservative writer, not some ugly journalist on the left.

*Answer* (Sir Robert): It is a very ingenious conspiracy theory and it is quite untrue.

Turnbull (1988) *The Spycatcher Trial*, p. 79.

What Sir Robert seems to be suggesting here, is that *because* what Turnbull is putting forward is a 'conspiracy theory', *that is a reason for supposing it to be false*. This wouldn't look at all plausible unless there was some sort of intellectual presumption against conspiracy theories. What adds poignancy to this exchange is that subsequent evidence seems to show that on this occasion Sir Robert's memory may have been at fault. There probably was just such a conspiracy as Turnbull alleged<sup>5</sup>. For the alternative explanation - that the Government wanted to suppress Pincher's book but was deterred by legal advice - presupposes Government lawyers of truly spectacular incompetence and does not sit well with Pincher's continued cosy relationship with the establishment. However, the issue is one that cuts across ordinary party political divisions. People with radically

---

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that this supposed conspiracy was particularly heinous. I am loathe to admit that Mrs. Thatcher could ever do anything right, but this conspiracy (if it existed) seems to me one of the most innocuous that was ever hatched between a Conservative prime minister and the Secret Service. The reason the unfortunate Sir Robert was constrained to deny it was that its existence (if it existed) undermined the British Government's case against Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher*. Their claim was that *any* book based on the revelations of former Secret Service operatives would be in breach of their duty of confidentiality and hence a threat to National Security. The Government could not therefore admit that they had sanctioned just such a book.

opposed ideologies can agree that conspiracy theories are appropriate when explaining social phenomena. It is just that they will tend to believe in different conspiracies<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. A Modest Proposal

I shall argue that it is *sometimes* appropriate to cite conspiracies in the explanation of historical events. This is a very modest claim. But modest though it is, it means that blanket denunciations of conspiracy theories are simply silly. The claim becomes a little less modest if we assert that is *often* appropriate to cite conspiracies; i.e. that they don't just occur once in a blue moon. And I shall argue for this too. If I am right it is perfectly reasonable to look for conspiracies in the explanation of events though you should not always expect to find them. Thus I am *not* saying that conspiracy theories can explain *everything*. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. It's a case of suck it and see.

Now *it may be that Popper does not disagree*. As we shall see, the version 'the conspiracy theory' that Popper wishes to deny is obviously false. But its falsehood is quite compatible with what I wish to assert. In other words, the fact that 'the conspiracy theory of society' *as stated by Popper* is false (or even absurd), does not imply that there are not a lot of conspiracies about or that they do not play an important role in the explanation of events. If so, the sophisticated foes of conspiracy are *vulgar Popperians* just as Popper thought many of the followers of Marx were *vulgar Marxists*. What they believe is a crude travesty of what the Master taught.

Let us define our terms. A *conspiracy* is a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action. Conspiracies therefore can be either good or bad depending on the purposes, circumstances and methods used. 'Conspiracy' as I use it, is not necessarily a pejorative word. However in a democracy, where politics is supposed to be above board, there is perhaps a *presumption* (but no more) that conspiracies are morally suspect.

---

<sup>6</sup> Though sometimes the different conspiracies can be run by the same conspirators. E.P. Thompson for instance, a leader of the non-aligned Peace Movement, gloried in the dual roles of a Soviet stooge (if not a Soviet agent) acting on the orders of the World Peace Council and the leader of a U.S or NATO inspired 'psychological warfare unit' acting on the orders of the CIA. (See the essay 'Double Exposure' in E.P. Thompson, 1985, *The Heavy Dancers*.)

### 3. 'The Conspiracy Theory': Popper's Version

Popper characterization of 'the conspiracy theory of society' is as follows:

'It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.'

What the 'theory' claims is *not* that the explanation of a social phenomena *often* consists in the discovery of men or groups who are interested in its occurrence, but that it *always* does. If this is the theory Popper is right to deny it. It is ridiculous to suppose that *every* social phenomenon is the product of a conspiracy. But by the same token it is a thesis that nobody believes. The denial of the conspiracy theory on this interpretation would be little more than a truism. For it is quite compatible with the denial of the conspiracy theory *in this sense* that the world should be choc-a-bloc with conspiracies, most of them successful. All that is required is that *some* phenomena result from other causes.

Nor is this all. Popper seems to suggest that according to the conspiracy theory, the explanation of an event consists *solely* in the discovery of a group of interested plotters. We don't need to talk about the circumstances that create the opportunities or the mechanisms used to influence affairs - a set of conspirators is all it takes. Again, if this is the conspiracy theory, it is obviously false. For it confers god-like powers upon the conspirators. It is as if the simple act of conspiring, irrespective of the social situation or the political, economic or opinion-making powers of the plotters, can have an impact on history. But again, if this is the conspiracy theory, it is a theory that nobody believes. Even the 'international conspiracy of Jews and bankers' (one of the most demented and catastrophic conspiracy theories ever put about) requires *influential* Jews and co-conspirators *who own or control banks*. If the Elders of Zion were simply a group of poor and otherwise friendless old men who met together in a bar in Brooklyn after unsuccessful

careers in the garment industry - well, they could plot all they liked, but nothing of any consequence would be likely to follow. Even the believers in the notorious Protocols did not think otherwise. Moreover, the denial of the conspiracy theory in this extreme form is quite compatible with what I want to uphold. The idea that it is reasonable to *look* for conspiracies does not imply that conspiracies *by themselves* can explain large-scale historical events.

A final problem with Popper's 'conspiracy theory' is this. Does the explanation of an event consist in a group of conspirators who planned to bring about *that very event*? Are we to understand that (at least when conspiracies are to be cited) what happens is just what the plotters ordered? Apparently yes. For in another formulation of the 'theory' Popper writes, 'It is the view that whatever happens in society ... are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups'. (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 341.) If so, 'the conspiracy theory' is committed to the view that history is to be explained in terms of *successful* conspiracies. It is not just that sometimes an event X is partly to be explained by a conspiracy - it must be explained by a conspiracy to bring about X! In which case the conspiracy theory is indeed incompatible with the cock-up theory. For a cock-up is a situation in which an event X is explained by a plan (or perhaps a conspiracy) to bring about Y which somehow goes astray. As we shall see, some of Popper's arguments suggest that this is how the conspiracy theory is to be understood. For he thinks that conspiracies seldom succeed and that this disproves the theory. If the theory entailed the prevalence of *successful* conspiracies then the prevalence of failure would be refutation enough. But again, if this is the theory, it is a theory that nobody believes. The real devotees of conspiracy, paranoid politicians who see conspiracies at every turn, try to frustrate those conspiracies with counterplots of their own. 'Confound their politicks/ Frustrate their knavish tricks!' - that is the program of conspiratorial politicians the world over. But if that is their program, they must believe that conspiracies *can* be frustrated, i.e. that they can fail. Failure is, after all, what they intend for the plots of their opponents. I suppose someone might believe that in the game of plot and counterplot it is a case of winner takes all. In a conflict of conspiracies *one* of the rival groups always achieves

success. That way, at least when conspiracies *are* responsible for events, those events will be what somebody has conspired to bring about. But this would require a special dispensation of Providence, a sort of God of the Plotters determined to ensure that at least one of the various conspiracies achieved its aims. Such a view is obviously fantastic. In fact, when conspiracies conflict, the final outcome may not be what *either* side planned to happen. In the game of plot and counterplot, *both* sides can wind up losers. Moreover, it is hard to believe that anyone with half a mind thinks differently. This is, after all, the common theme of tragedy and farce.

Popper's own remarks reinforce this line of criticism. According to Popper, the 'conspiracy theory' is the secularized version of a religious belief. The idea that what goes on in the world is due to the machinations of the men of power is the secular successor to the view that events are controlled by the conspiracies of the gods. Popper explicitly cites the gods of Homer in this connection. But the Homeric gods whose intrigues determine the events before Troy are divided into factions which try to frustrate each other's plans. The outcome is not always what either side intends. Thus the secularized successor to *this* system of Divine intervention can hardly be Popper's 'conspiracy theory' in which every (significant) event is what some set of conspirators planned to happen. The 'Post-Homeric' conspiracy theory would deliver us over to the tender mercies of rival groups of plotters whose schemes could be as disastrous when they did *not* succeed as when they did. We would not just be as flies to wanton boys. We would be as flies to wanton boys who got into gang-fights and visited us with the unintended consequences of their actions (when they attacked each other with fly-spray for instance).

So again we are left with a reading of 'the conspiracy theory' which damns it to absurdity, but which renders its denial uninteresting. Moreover its falsehood is quite compatible with what I want to assert. The claim that (when conspiracies are to be cited) events cannot always be explained in terms of *successful* conspiracies, does not entail that many events cannot be explained by conspiracies successful and otherwise.

The upshot of all this is that Popper is right to deny the 'conspiracy theory' as he understands it. But he is denying something that nobody asserts. Furthermore, his denial does not imply that conspiracies do not often play a role in the explanation of events, nor that conspiracies do not sometimes succeed. In other words, smug denials of this or that conspiracy on the grounds that 'the conspiracy theory of history is false' are based on a confusion. The falsehood of 'the conspiracy theory' (as understood by Popper) does not entail that *individual* conspiracy theories are false. It does not even create a presumption to that effect.

#### 4. A Sceptical Presumption?

It looks like it is all up for the lordly foes of conspiracy. They have no argument to sustain their pose of sophisticated skepticism. But in fact they are still in with a chance. For Popper's denial of 'the conspiracy theory' is backed by arguments. And it may be that these arguments support a stronger conclusion than the one he propounds in the *Open Society*. Perhaps there is some sort of *presumption* against conspiracy theories. Perhaps conspiracies are rare or relatively impotent so that they do not have much impact on history. Indeed in *Conjectures and Refutations* p. 342, Popper asserts precisely this. 'They [that is conspiracies] are not very frequent and do not change the character of social life.' If conspiracies were to cease, 'we would still be faced with fundamentally the same problems which have always faced us.' (Since Popper is making a claim about the past as well as the present and the future, he ought to say that *if people had ceased to conspire at any point in history* then we would still be faced with much the same problems.) Do his arguments support such a claim? Before answering this question, I want to consider an objection to my own enterprise.

I have accused Popper of denying what nobody (or better hardly anybody) asserts. But am I not asserting what nobody denies? I have claimed that conspiracies, successful and otherwise, often play a part in history (though their influence depends on the



historical situation and the powers at the disposal of the conspirators). Who would oppose such a platitude? Perhaps nobody would *explicitly*. But the starting point of this paper is that a lot of people deny it *implicitly*. This happens every time someone pooh-poohs a conspiracy theory *simply on the grounds that it is a conspiracy theory* rather than on the grounds (say) that the alleged conspirators did not know each other or were too stupid to have thought up such a devious plan or lacked the resources to carry it through. I may be arguing for a platitude, but platitudes, like tautologies, can acquire importance by being denied.

Let us take *the* conspiracy theory then, to be *my* theory that it is often appropriate to cite conspiracies in the explanation of events. ('Theory' is perhaps too grand a term for this bland thesis, but let it pass.) Let the denial of this theory be the claim that there is some sort of *presumption* against conspiratorial explanations, so that we only posit conspiracies if the evidence in their favour is overwhelming. We will then examine a set of events for which a conspiratorial explanation seems plausible. Does Popper provide any reason to reject that explanation?

## 5. The King's Civil List and the Refining Historians

In order to steer clear of current controversies I shall concentrate on a putative conspiracy that no longer excites political passions. On his accession George II managed to get his Civil List increased by hesitating publicly as to who would be the new Prime Minister. Rival parliamentary factions were forced to bid for his favour by raising the Civil List. Was this the happy outcome of drift and indecision on George's part or was there a conspiracy in the King's immediate entourage? My witness throughout is the courtier-historian Lord Hervey<sup>7</sup>.

George II hated his father (an attitude that came to be traditional amongst Hanoverians), and this hatred spilled over into a dislike of the Chief Minister Sir Robert

---

<sup>7</sup> See John, Lord Hervey, 1952, *Lord Hervey's Memoirs*, ed. Romney Sedgwick, London, William Kimber.

Walpole. As Prince of Wales he had denounced Walpole as a great rogue and his brother-in-law, Lord Townsend, as a choleric blockhead. (Like many royal persons who are under no necessity of concealing their opinions, the Prince prided himself on his outspokenness.) When Walpole brought the George the news of his father's death, the new King told him to take his instructions from Sir Spencer Compton who had been George's treasurer as Prince of Wales. Everyone assumed that Compton would be the new Prime Minister, and before long a horde of sycophants were 'all shouldering one another to pay adoration to this new idol and knocking their heads together to whisper compliments and petitions as he passed'. Sir Robert Walpole alone walked through the royal chambers 'as if they had been still empty' since 'the same people who were officiously a week ago clearing the way to flatter his prosperity, were now getting out of it to avoid sharing his disgrace.' Compton was known to have the support of the King's mistress Mrs. Howard. What was less well known was that Walpole enjoyed the support of the new Queen, Caroline of Anspach. Although he everywhere boasted that Caroline 'never meddled with his business', it was soon discovered that she not only 'meddled with business, but directed everything that came under that name, either at home or abroad'. People did not realize the magnitude of the Queen's influence over the King to begin with because of his constant habit of snubbing her in public. Eventually her influence won through and Walpole retained his job. As he delicately put it, he had 'the right sow by the ear'. But there was a prolonged interval before this decision was publicly made. I shall quote the golden prose of Lord Hervey.

'But as the King was not pressed to the taking of this step, and that his Civil List (which was at the present chief object in his view) was in less than a fortnight to be settled in Parliament, he very naturally deferred the change in his administration till the great and favorite point was determined; and that it would be adjusted to his satisfaction by the unanimous concurrence of all parties, he very prudently chose not to make the one desperate, though he gave the others hopes, and kept the interest of every other body in suspense, that his own might be pursued without

opposition; though perhaps like many other refining historians, I attribute that to prudence which was only owing to an accident, two things often mistaken for the other. But whether it was the effect of policy or the natural consequence of the present juncture of the affairs, whatever was the cause of his conduct, this was certainly the effect - that the postponing thus the gratification of his resentment facilitated the success of his own affairs in Parliament.'

Here than we have a political phenomenon: the King was granted a Civil List vastly in excess of what any King had enjoyed before, and this despite the fact that nobody liked him or wished him well personally. The parliamentary factions were, as Hervey puts it, 'bidding for his favour at the expense of the public'.

There are three possible explanations.

1. (The Conspiracy Theory). Someone in the King's immediate entourage, probably the Queen realized that it would be to his advantage to put off, or to appear to put off, making the decision as to who would be Prime Minister, in order to achieve the desired result. (We can assume that the King was far too silly to have thought of this for himself.)

2 (The Drift/Conspiracy Theory). The King was for a while genuinely undecided. Someone in his entourage, probably the Queen, realized the beneficial effects of his indecision, and advised him to put off making his decision (if any) public.

3. (The Pure Drift Theory). The King just took a long time to make up his mind and it was pure luck and 'the logic of the situation' that this worked to his financial advantage.

Hervey attributes option 1. to the 'refining historians,' who attribute too much to prudence and policy, and cautiously suspends judgement between 1. and 3. He does not discuss 2., but it is an obvious halfway house. I call 1. a conspiracy theory, although it does not require all that much covert action on the part of the plotters, because it portrays the phenomenon as the product of conscious plotting, the outcome of design. There must be at least some getting together to talk things through and at least one secret decision made - the decision *not* to announce the identity of the new Prime Minister *even if* that had been decided upon.

Now, does Popper give us any reason to suppose is that there is some sort of presumption against option 1.? Are we to believe that Hervey's 'refining historians' are almost always in the wrong? Without such a presumption, options 1 - 3 are pretty much on a par. Further evidence is required to choose between them. The Queen was intelligent - but was she interested in money? An unworldly person however smart might not be struck by the pecuniary possibilities of the situation<sup>8</sup>. Was there anyone *else* about the King who might have seen the advantages to be derived from indecision? Are there any memoranda between the Queen and the King discussing the matter? Did other courtiers besides Lord Hervey overhear anything relevant? And so on and so on.

## 6. Popper's Arguments

The first thing to note is that Popper does not actually deny that conspiracies occur. On the contrary, they are 'typical social phenomena'. (To be sure, he goes back on this in his 1948 paper 'Prediction and Prophecy' *Conjectures and Refutations* p. 342 where he asserts that conspiracies are 'not very frequent'. But since this is a 'conjecture' positively loaded with refutations and since it is a claim totally unsupported by argument, I shall ignore it and take the true Popper to be the New Zealand Popper rather than the established

---

<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that the Queen *was* unworldly - the evidence suggests otherwise - merely that she might have been.

Popper of the LSE<sup>9</sup>.) By allowing that conspiracies are ‘typical social phenomena’ or in still plainer language that there are a lot of them about, (the young) Popper immediately separates himself from some of his more vulgar followers who seem to imply that nobody ever conspires to do anything. (Though it must be admitted that in 1948 Popper gave a good deal of aid and comfort to the vulgarians.) What then has Popper got against conspiracy theories? The fact (or the alleged fact) that ‘few of these conspiracies are ultimately successful. *Conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy*’. Popper, like many of his vulgar imitators is a believer in the ‘cock-up’ theory of history. The reason conspiracy theories are false is that conspiracies usually fail. But why is this supposed to disprove the conspiracy theory? (After all, as I have already argued, a cock-up presupposes a conspiracy or at least a plan.) Because the conspiracy theory involves the claim that historical phenomena are the products of *successful* conspiracies.

But this means that the revised claim suggested by Popper’s argument is very different from the vulgar version put about by conspiratorial politicians. For it is quite compatible with the revised thesis that the world should be positively bursting with conspiracies, that many, if not most historical phenomena are the partial products of conspiratorial activity, *so long as these conspiracies are not ultimately successful*. Politicians cannot cite Popper (or at least cannot cite Popper’s arguments) in defence of the claim that they are not conspiring because conspiracies don’t happen. The best they can do is cite Popper in defence of the claim that we don’t have to worry about their conspiracies because they won’t work out. Unfortunately this is not much of a consolation since (as Popper himself makes plain) the consequences of failed conspiracies are often disastrous. Even when they are not disastrous, the results can be quite momentous. The most recent example is the failed conspiracy of the Communist Old Guard to overthrow Gorbachev. This led to the collapse of Communism within the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Soviet state. Its effect on ‘the character of social life’ within the countries concerned has been quite considerable.

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Prediction and Prophecy’, the essay from which this passage is extracted, was originally delivered in 1948, some years after the *Open Society* was written.

We are left with the claim that not many historical phenomena are the products of conscious design whether conspiratorial or other. Refining historians are in the wrong, not because people do not plot, plan or conspire but because what happens is not what they intended. The very fact that George II got his raise suggests that it is not what he or his wife had in mind.

Does this claim contradict my version of the conspiracy theory? I think so, yes. The idea is that it is never, or hardly ever, right to explain an event X as the result of a conspiracy to bring about X. X may be due to a conspiracy to bring about Y, but in history unintended outcomes are the rule. When it comes to conspiracy, nothing succeeds as planned. (Obviously this is not meant to apply to what might be called the conspiratorial events themselves, the unmediated actions of the plotters, such as getting together to conspire, passing messages to their lieutenants etc.) My claim is that conspiracies, successful and otherwise, are often among the causes of historical events. And by this I mean to imply that successful (or perhaps partially successful) conspiracies are not unheard of. The fact that X occurred is not *prima facie* evidence that nobody conspired to bring it about. So my version of the conspiracy theory is incompatible with the revised thesis suggested by Popper's argument.

But unfortunately for Popper's followers, the revised thesis does not follow from his premise. For the fact, if it is a fact, that conspirators by and large do not *ultimately* succeed, does not imply that they cannot chalk up quite a number of successes along the way. A long-range plan involves a large number of steps. And it is quite compatible with the ultimate failure of the plan that many of the intermediate steps are successfully implemented. Suppose that (God or the Dialectic forbid!) I join the Otago University Bolshevik club with the object of producing a Leninist revolution in Wellington and bringing about the Kingdom of Ends in New Zealand. Everything runs like clockwork to the point where the Bolshevik Party is in power in Wellington. But then a New Zealand Stalin emerges who eliminates the old Bolsheviks, including me, and establishes a cult of personality and (as the Bolshevik jargon would have it) a 'deformed workers state'. The

ultimate failure of my project does not mean that the previous phases of the revolution were not the products of conscious design or conspiratorial activity. Many of the events in Lenin's revolution *were* the products of conspiracy, even though he did not consummate his ambitions. (Compare 'The State and Revolution' with early Soviet society as it actually was.)

By the same token, Popper's emphasis on the unintended consequences of actions does not show that conspiracy theories must be wrong. George II's pay-rise had all sorts of unfortunate consequences for him. Specifically it precipitated a quarrel with his son, which forced the latter into Opposition and led to no end of trouble. It would not be too much to say that George was living with the unintended consequences to the end of his reign. But the fact that this pay-rise had unintended consequences does not show that it was not the result of a successful, if low-level, conspiracy.

Besides, Popper's premise is false. Some conspirators *do* consummate their conspiracies. Nor are such successful conspiracies too rare to be worth bothering with. You cannot have a *coup* without a conspiracy, and some coups succeed - quite enough to make conspiracy an important factor in history.

Popper might object that they do not succeed *in the long run* as subsequent events do not turn out the way the conspirators planned. I have three replies to this.

1. By putting off the success of a conspiracy into the long run in which we are all dead, this maneuver renders what ought to be an empirical thesis ('Conspirators seldom consummate their conspiracies') close to irrefutable. For however successful a conspiracy may be, it is always possible that it will end in tears (from the conspirators' point of view of course). This vague appeal to the long term is therefore contrary to Popperian method. (It is analogous to the Marxian maneuver of saving Marx from refutation by putting off the predicted collapse of capitalism into an indefinite future.) Worse, if the standards for

'consummation' are set too high, the thesis 'Conspirators seldom consummate their conspiracies' becomes true but trivial. If a conspiracy counts as unconsummated whenever things happen afterwards which the conspirators do not like, or would not have approved of, then indeed it will be true that conspirators seldom (or even *never*) consummate their conspiracies. But this will not deter a rational person from entering into a conspiracy in the hopes of some less demanding kind of success. No doubt, Jefferson would have disapproved of the L.A. riots. This does not mean that the American Revolution was a failure. Indeed, the degree of success enjoyed by Jefferson and his confederates is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

2. Even if we concede that conspirators seldom consummate their conspiracies (where consummation is a relatively long-term affair) this does not suggest that individual conspiracy theories are false. To revert to an earlier example, I am inclined to believe that New Zealand's lurch to the right was due to a loose conspiracy between leading politicians, Treasury and big business. Suppose the opposition Alliance comes to power and New Zealand lurches back to the left, leaving the schemes of the alleged conspirators unconsummated. This would in no way disprove the existence of the initial conspiracy. So far from a tendency to long-term failure telling against conspiracy theories, it is often when things begin to come unstuck that the existence of conspiracies becomes evident. (Again, think of Watergate.)

3. So long as we do not set our sights too high, we don't have to look too far for conspiracies that *have* succeeded in the long term. I have mentioned the American Revolution already. A better example is the Glorious Revolution of 1688. William III, 'our glorious deliverer from Popery and slavery' laid the foundations of the liberal (I do not say democratic!) order which has prevailed in Britain ever since, and has been widely imitated throughout the globe. The arbitrary power of the monarch was destroyed without initiating a social



revolution or threatening the property rights of the emergent oligarchy. Even so, the Revolution was good for Europe and the West generally and a disaster only for the Irish. (Even Marx seems to have thought it was historically progressive, though he was obviously loathe to say so.) Yet the Revolution was not so much the result of one conspiracy as of a tangle of conspiracies. A group of noblemen conspired with William's envoy Zulestein to invite him over, William conspired to create an expeditionary force without revealing his ultimate objective, James's daughter Anne conspired with William, with her friend Lady Churchill and with the Bishop of London to desert her father, and James II's army fell apart at Salisbury because of the prearranged treachery of his leading officers. (Though James's own incompetence played a large part in the proceedings). This was conspiracy on a grand scale and with conspicuous success.<sup>10</sup>

(We can imagine the scene in James's H.Q. as one by one his officers begin to peel off in the general direction of William's army. James consults his trusted lieutenant, the arch-traitor, Lord Churchill, subsequently Duke of Marlborough. 'Do you think there's a plot?' James asks. 'I don't believe in the conspiracy theory of history your Majesty', Churchill blandly replies.)

### **7. Historical Explanation and the Possibility of Conspiracy.**

Suppose we look a little deeper into Popper's philosophy. Does his theory of historical explanation preclude successful conspiracies or create a presumption that conspiracies are rare or are likely to fail? In fact Popper offers us (at least) two accounts of historical explanation<sup>11</sup>. Neither justifies his skeptical presumption.

---

<sup>10</sup> Lord Macauley's *History of England* still provides a very readable narrative history of the Revolution. For a more modern and concise account see van der Zee, H & B, 1988, *1688: Revolution in the Family*.

<sup>11</sup> See Popper 'Autobiography' in Schilpp ed., 1974, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, p. 93, Popper, 1957, *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 143-6, Popper, 1966, *The Open Society*, vol. II, Ch. 14, and Popper, 1972, *Objective Knowledge*, ch. 4. 'On the Theory of the Objective Mind'.

1. The explanation of an historical event (like the explanation of any other event) consists in a (rather sketchy) deduction of the *explanandum* from a set of initial conditions and universal laws. The problem with this account is that where human actions are to be explained, such an explanation would have to resort to psychological laws, and there are no laws of the right kind. The best we can hope for are useful generalizations. To cite one of Popper's own examples, we might well appeal to Caesar's ambition and energy in explaining his decision to cross the Rubicon. But I'll bet there have been other ambitious and energetic generals in history who decided *not* to cross their personal Rubicons out of a respect for legality. Even if we can solve this problem (perhaps by adding the Caesar was unscrupulous) such universal laws will not explain 'the particular go' of Caesar's decisions such as why he placed his elite troops on the left rather than the right in some battle. For this decision might well embody a novel and creative solution to a military problem, which only Caesar could have come up with. But whatever the defects of Popper's model, it does not, by itself, preclude conspiracies successful or otherwise. Why shouldn't the initial conditions include a set of individuals with a common interest and the wit to see that it could be furthered by covert action? And what are the universal laws that prohibit (or even inhibit) success? Even if such laws *can* be produced, it won't be Popper's model of explanation that precludes conspiracies (successful or otherwise) but the universal laws themselves.

2. Popper's second model of historical explanation is linked to his famous thesis that there is a 'Third World' of theories, propositions, numbers etc, alongside the 'First World' of physical objects and the 'Second World' of psychological states<sup>12</sup>. Popper develops this model to account for some of Galileo's *theoretical* actions and then generalizes it to actions of a less cerebral sort<sup>13</sup>. Galileo devised a false theory of the tides which did away with lunar influence. In the process he behaved in a rather shabby way towards Kepler, using some of his results whilst ignoring others and neglecting to answer

---

<sup>12</sup> This thesis has been subjected to a brilliant and scathing critique by Feyerabend in 'Popper's *Objective Knowledge*' reprinted in Feyerabend, 1981, *Problems of Empiricism: Philosophical Papers vol. 2*. Feyerabend is like the Piranha Brothers of *Monty Python* fame - vicious but fair.

<sup>13</sup> See 'On the Theory of the Objective Mind', in Popper, 1972b, *Objective Knowledge*, especially pp. 170-190.

his letters. Various psychological explanations have been proposed for all this that appeal to Galileo's less admirable traits, such as vanity, ambition and a mystic fixation with circular motion. Popper claims (and tries to make this good in detail) that Galileo's behaviour can be explained as a rational response to a problem situation (which situation is to be understood as a Third World entity). Only trivial psychological assumptions are required in addition. Galileo comes out of this rather sordid intellectual episode smelling of roses, a pure saint of Popperian rationalism, whose psychological quirks can be safely discounted. In the language of Lakatos' 'The History of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions', Galileo's actions belong to the *internal* rather than the *external* history of science, where the demarcation between the internal and the external is determined by Popperian method. In general human behaviour is to be understood as the rational response to a problem situation. We only drag in the non-trivial psychology when the behaviour deviates from this norm. We might say that to understand an action is to reconstruct the reasoning behind it. This is not *quite* right, because the reasoning involved may be inaccessible, especially if it is original and creative. We do not in general *know* how people come up with creative solutions to the problems that they face. But what we *can* understand is why the action arrived at (whether theoretical or other) *counts* as a solution to the problem; why it is not 'refuted' as a possible solution by the 'logic of the situation'. (This fits in nicely with other parts of Popper's philosophy.) To put the point in the psychologistic mode, we do not know how people come up with good ideas, but we can often tell why something seemed like a good idea at the time.<sup>14</sup>

When Popper's theory is corrected (and it does stand in need of correction) two conclusions emerge. a) Popper's account of historical explanation, when shorn of its errors, is very much like Collingwood's. b) The model is in no way incompatible with conspiracy theories.

The obvious objection to Popper's theory is that the actions of a rational agent are not determined directly by the way the world is (or even the way the Third World is), but

---

<sup>14</sup> . Collingwood has a very similar conception of how to do intellectual history. See Collingwood, 1946, p 312

the way it is believed to be. Whatever the 'problem situation' may be, if I believe it to be otherwise it is my beliefs not the situation itself that determine what I do. Even when the problem situation *is* as I believe it, it is the fact that I believe it to be so, not the situation itself that governs my decisions. It is only through the medium of belief that an objective problem situation can generate - and hence *explain* - an action<sup>15</sup>. Sometimes Popper seems to see this, as when he says that the historian's task is to 'reconstruct the problem situation as it appeared to the agent'. But he does not seem to realize that this gives the game away. For the situation *as it appeared to the agent* is simply what the agent believed the situation to be. And that brings us back to beliefs which are Second World entities. Once this is seen, Popper's arguments for a Third World begin to evaporate. Why posit a Third World entity to account for our actions when a set of beliefs will do? After all, we need the beliefs *anyway*. Indeed, once we admit beliefs, we can use them to reduce the Third world to the Second. The problem situation in science can be construed as what an ideal Popperian enquirer would believe (or would believe to be problematic) given the information available at the time. Thus an ideal cognitive agent allows us to reconstruct the *internal* history of science without recourse to spooks. As for practical (as opposed to theoretical) problems, these never looked like Third World entities to begin with. In everyday life the problem is usually a set of circumstances - First World objects or perhaps, people standing in certain relations - which the agent wants to change.

And this brings me to another objection. A set of beliefs only represents a problem given certain wants. You may be pointing a gun at my head, but if I don't care whether I live or die that is not a problem. In this instance the desire to live may be so common as to qualify as trivial in Popper's sense. But the desires won't be so 'trivial' in every case of historical explanation. We can illustrate this with respect to his own example. Consider Galileo again. Popper explains what he is doing as a rational response to a certain problem, where rationality is defined in terms of Popperian method. Given this situation - or better, given Galileo's *beliefs* about this situation - Galileo's theoretical behaviour can be

---

<sup>15</sup> Popper could reply with the dogmatic claim that to believe, think, consider or hypothesize *that* P, is to be in contact with a Third World entity, namely the proposition P. But he provides no arguments (or at any rate no new ones) for this shopworn thesis.

put down to two desires: the desire to find out about the tides and the desire to pursue his enquiries in accordance with the principles of Popperian method. The problem is not a problem without the will to truth, and the eventual solution cannot be explained (that is we cannot show why *this* rather than *that* was deemed to be the right answer) without positing methodological preferences<sup>16</sup>. Now so far from these desires being trivial they are odd in the extreme. Not many people really care about what causes the tides. And despite a long propaganda campaign, not many people want to conduct their researches in strict accordance with Popper's commandments. Galileo almost certainly did not.

Popper's model of historical explanation, it appears, collapses back into belief/desire psychology as applied to the past. But belief/desire explanations are pretty much what Collingwood had in mind. (See Collingwood, 1946, *The Idea of History*.) The re-enactment of past experience is really the reconstruction of practical reasoning<sup>17</sup>. Indeed Collingwood usually talks of the historian 're-enact[ing] in his own mind the *thoughts* or *motives* of the agents whose actions he is narrating' (p. 115, my italics) or of 're-thinking' the 'thoughts' of the relevant actors (pp. 283, 217, 215 and 177). Even when Collingwood *does* talk of re-enacting past experience, 'experience' turns out to be such a cognitive affair as to be scarcely distinguishable from thought. (See Collingwood, 1946, pp. 302-3.) Popper seems to suggest that it cannot be the historian's business to re-enact the thought-processes of the agent since the agent and the historian face two distinct problems with different solutions. (*Objective Knowledge*, p. 188.) The agent's problem (given his desires) is a set of historical circumstances (or, seen from the outside, his *beliefs* about those circumstances). His solution is the action to be explained. The historian's problem is a meta-problem, to find out what the agent's problem was (and here, *pace* Popper, it is the *subjective* problem that is important since it is the subjective problem that determines what

---

<sup>16</sup> To be fair, Popper could subtract from the preference set by adding an extra belief. If Galileo believed that by pursuing Popper's method (though not under that name!) he was likely to arrive at the truth, then the will to truth (or even the truth about the tides) could do all. But in place of the methodological preference we would now have a methodological belief - indeed a belief which even Popper rejects. To make this work, Galileo would have to be Popper - but Popper with a 'whiff of inductivism'. It seems a simpler hypothesis to credit him with envy and ambition. See Lakatos, 1974, 'Popper on Demarcation and Induction' reprinted in Lakatos, 1978, and Popper's rather acid reply in Schilpp ed. 1974.

<sup>17</sup> This humdrum but sensible interpretation of Collingwood is largely due to Dray, 'R.G. Collingwood and the Understanding of Actions in History' in Dray, 1980, *Perspectives on History*.

the agent *does*). Since the problems are distinct, so are the procedures required to solve them. But the solution to the historian's problem will be a belief/desire explanation - an account of the agent's *subjective* problem (determined by his beliefs, desires and habits of mind) that renders the action a plausible solution. And it may well be that the best way to arrive at such an account is to re-enact the agent's thinking, or to run a series of 'off-line simulations'<sup>18</sup> until you arrive at a subjective problem that the action could be expected to solve.

By distinguishing between the problem situation as it was and as it appeared to be, we can improve on both Collingwood and Popper. For though a set of beliefs and desires can explain an action, they cannot explain what happened thereafter. To do that we need the problem situation as it was and the effect on that situation of the agent's actions. Furthermore, the agent's beliefs cannot explain any unintended consequences or even the action itself if the agent was not fully aware of what he was doing<sup>19</sup>. To do that we need the agent's beliefs, the problem situation as it actually was and some sort of mismatch between the two. Sometimes the beliefs will be false. Why did the merciful but shortsighted Empress sign the death warrant? Because she believed it to be a pardon. Sometimes the beliefs will be true so far as they go, but will leave something out of account. Why did King Wilhelm's pacific telegram precipitate the Franco-Prussian War? Because the King's problem situation included not only a bellicose Napoleon III but also a scheming Bismarck, and the King had left Bismarck out of his calculations. He did not realize that his minister actually *wanted* the war and was prepared to tamper with a telegram in order to bring it about. Popper emphasizes the prevalence of unintended consequences, yet these cannot be explained in terms of his official theory - they are just brute facts. But once we distinguish between the real problem situation and the agent's

---

<sup>18</sup> The terminology is borrowed from Alvin Goldman, 1992, 'In Defence of Simulation Theory', *Mind and Language*, Vol. 7. nos. 1 & 2. Goldman argues that we understand other people by simulating their mental processes rather than accessing a *theory*, namely folk-psychology.

<sup>19</sup> Collingwood is aware that his method can only account for actions 'done on purpose'. (Collingwood, 1946, p. 310.) In so far as human history is (in Adam Ferguson's famous phrase) 'the result of human action, not of human design', Collingwood is officially debarred from giving an account of it. Thus Collingwood's historical method represents an intellectual retreat from the Scottish Enlightenment. History is not, as he supposed (p. 115), the history of human thought, but of human thought interacting with its environment (an environment which includes other thinkers).

beliefs about it, we can see why they are so common. For no set of beliefs (and *a fortiori* no set of beliefs about a problem situation) can match the complexity of the real world. Any situation in which human beings act (or, at least, any *likely* situation) will contain causally active ingredients that the agent has not taken into account. Hence the unintended consequences.

Thus the revised theory vindicates unintended consequences. But it does nothing to discredit conspiracies. What are the conditions for conspiracy according to this theory? The conspirators must see themselves as facing a problem which can be solved by covert action. They must believe that their own unaided efforts will not suffice. They must believe that there are other people who believe (or can be made to believe) that they face a problem with the same solution. (This last belief must be true, or the conspiracy will never get off the ground.) They must believe that these other people can be relied on not to blab (otherwise the conspiracy will leak like a sieve). Finally the conspiracy is unlikely to be even a partial success unless the beliefs of the conspirators are largely correct. The real problem situation must be pretty much as they believe it to be or they will not succeed without exceptional good luck. (Though as we have just seen there will almost always be more to the situation than the conspirators are aware of.) *But there is no reason to suppose that these conditions cannot be met.* Hence conspiracies, even successful conspiracies, are perfectly possible on Popper's model. Indeed, they remain a possibility even if we leave the model in its uncorrected state. They are not even unlikely - that is the model in itself gives us no reason to suppose that they will be few and far between. Skeptics about conspiracies will find no comfort here.

### **8. Three Fallback Positions**

This is not quite the end of the matter however. Three fallback positions remain to Popper. He hints at two of them in his writings. Firstly he could restrict the range of his skeptical presumption. He could admit the existence and the influence of conspiracies but deny that they have much impact on social life. To be sure, conspiracies can explain

events, but these events themselves are comparatively trivial. Conspiracies therefore are largely confined to the small change of history. If people gave up conspiring, or had given it up at some point in the past, we would still face much the same problems as we face today. For our major problems are not caused by conspiracy. So there is no presumption against Hervey's refining historians in the case of George II. There might have been a conspiracy to secure his raise.<sup>20</sup> After all, the effects on social life were minimal - a slight addition to the Sinking Fund, perhaps a fraction on the Income Tax. But if George had ever done something *big* with his extra cash - something that 'made a difference' as we say - then there would be a presumption against conspiracy.

The skeptical presumption that remains is too weak to be of much service to Popper's vulgar disciples. For many of the conspiracies that are passed off with a show of sophisticated scepticism are comparatively trivial affairs. If there was a conspiracy to allow Pincher rather than 'some ugly journalist of the left' to ventilate the suspicion that Hollis was a Soviet agent, this was not a conspiracy that had a major impact on social life. After all, the bad news had been known to the readers of *Private Eye* for some time. If the FBI conspired to undermine the marriage of a civil rights activist by mailing anonymous letters ('[Your] old lady doesn't get enough at home or she wouldn't be shucking and jiving with our Black Men ...')<sup>21</sup> well, the impact was largely confined to the activists concerned. If the Committee to Re-Elect the President burglarized the Watergate building and the President conspired to cover it up, the impact on society was minimal - at least until these conspiracies came to light. But what about the alleged conspiracy between the Reagan campaign and the Iranians to delay the release of the US hostages until after the election?<sup>22</sup> That is a tough one. If you think that Carter's failures with regard to the

---

<sup>20</sup> It appears that there probably was a conspiracy to raise George II's civil list, and that the prime mover was Walpole. George I died on June 11th in Germany en route for Hanover, the news reached England on the 14th, and on the 15th - whilst he was still ostensibly in disgrace - Walpole was discussing with George II plans for raising the royal salary. This we have from the papers of the Duke of Newcastle, one of Walpole's confederates. (See Hill (1989) p.147.) According to Newcastle the King 'talked a great deal to Sir Robert about the Civil List'. Did Walpole suggest 'that if your Majesty decides to retain my services it might be wise not to mention the fact'? Did Caroline say something to the same effect? If so, the conspiracy theory is vindicated.

<sup>21</sup> See Richard M. Fried, 1990, *Nightmare in Red*, p. 190-191.

<sup>22</sup> See the articles 'Original Sin', 'A Few Questions', and 'Triumph of the Will', reprinted in Christopher Hitchens, 1988, *Prepared for the Worst*.



hostages did not lead to his defeat, then there is no particular reason for scepticism. If the evidence points that way, you are at liberty to believe. But if you think that Carter lost because of the hostages and that the Reagan administration 'made a difference', then the skeptical presumption kicks in. Conspiracies do not have much impact on history; this one (if it existed) did; *ergo* there was probably no such conspiracy. There is something very cock-eyed about this principle which apports belief not on the basis of evidence (motive, opportunity, etc.) but according to the effects of the alleged conspiracy.

However that may be, the fallback thesis is false. Conspiracies *do* have a major effect on history. Popper himself admits as much. Lenin's revolution, Hitler's revolution and Hitler's war 'were indeed conspiracies'. (*Conjectures and Refutations* p. 125.)<sup>23</sup> (We might add Tojo's war to the list.) But the impact of these conspiracies has been incalculable. Without these conspiracies, one is inclined to say, there would *be* no twentieth century. Certainly the history of our times would have been wildly different. Their impact on social life has been catastrophic. Apart from the displaced persons (such a Popper himself) millions now dead might have lived out their lives but for these conspiracies. And we might well have been spared the threat of nuclear annihilation - the most serious 'problem' mankind has ever faced.

(And if you want a contemporary example, may I point out that it is difficult to organize a death-squad without conspiracy. Yet these have quite an impact in the countries where they operate<sup>24</sup>)

Sometimes what Popper seems to be saying is that large scale historical disasters - war and famine, depression and mass unemployment - are not the results of conspiracy. Here we must distinguish between two claims: a) that war, famine, depression and unemployment are not caused or made worse by conspiracies: and b) that they are not the

---

<sup>23</sup> Rather oddly Popper goes on to say that these were the 'consequences' of conspiracy theorists coming to power. But the revolutions themselves were surely the acts by which conspiracy theorists came to power, not the consequences thereof.

<sup>24</sup> To those with the stomach for it, I recommend the back numbers of the *Amnesty International Newsletter*.

products of *deliberate* conspiracy, i.e. that even if a conspiracy *is* responsible, war, famine or unemployment are not what the plotters conspired to bring about. Both claims are false. War, famine and unemployment can be caused (or part-caused) by conspiracies and in some cases war or famine is what the plotters had in mind.

Let us start with the Great War. This is the ur-catastrophe from which the other disasters of the Twentieth Century follow. An account of its 'origins' (the coy modern synonym for 'causes') would have to include the secret undertakings of Sir Edward Grey, the Schlieffen Plan, consultations between the Austrian and German General Staffs, not to mention the plots of Gavrilo Prinkip and his friends. The importance of military timetables in the events that led up to the War should not be forgotten. Military plans tend to be secret as are some of the actions they dictate. Soldiering is thus a conspiratorial business particularly at the highest level. This was certainly so in 1914. Of course, unintended consequences played a part in bringing about the catastrophe. But what these unintended consequences were consequences *of* was in many cases a conspiracy or a set of conspiracies. Conspiracies then, were among the causes of the Great War. And in this, at least, it was not unique. Once it is admitted that *wars* can be caused by conspiracies it is clear that *famines* can be caused by conspiracies too. For some famines are caused by war. For example, there was widespread famine in the wake of the Russian Civil War, which in turn was due to what Popper admits was a conspiratorial revolution<sup>25</sup>. In other cases famine can be caused or part-caused by economic policies imposed by a conspiratorial elite. To quote Robert Conquest: 'It was doubtless probable that Ethiopia should be taken over by radical officers, but their key achievement, the destruction of the country's agriculture was solely the result of their acceptance of Marxist ideology'<sup>26</sup>. What about lesser disasters such as depression and unemployment? When Popper writes about these things, it is clearly the Great Depression that he has in mind. And it is pretty clear that this

---

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Conquest, 1986, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, ch. 3, particularly p. 55. Conquest claims that the weather, though bad, was not primarily responsible for the famine. It was the result of war and of mistaken policies on the part of the Soviet government (though famine was not, in this instance, what they intended). Conquest also claims that alongside the 'official' civil war between the Reds and the Whites, there was an ongoing *peasant* war between the Greens (the peasants) and the Reds.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Conquest, 1992, 'The Party in the Dock' *TLS*.

was not caused by a conspiracy. (In so far as government decisions *did* play a part in the process, they were not secret.) But this is not to say that conspiracy *never* has a part to play in the causation of depression and unemployment. To demonstrate the *possibility* of conspiracy-induced unemployment we simply need the following premises: 1) that government action can induce unemployment (surely an uncontroversial claim!); and 2) that government decisions are sometimes due to conspiracy (again not exactly an eye-opener!). Moving from the possible to the actual, I would argue - though this is more tendentious - that the high level of unemployment in New Zealand is partly due to a conspiracy. Unemployment is the result of the New Right policies introduced by Roger Douglas (Labour) and Ruth Richardson (National). These policies were adopted on a conspiratorial basis, since they were never put to the people but were imposed within each party by an ideological faction that was able to dominate caucus and repudiate the manifesto. (I should stress though that for most of the conspirators, unemployment was an unintended, and perhaps unforeseen, by-product of their policies.)

Are war and famine ever the products of a *deliberate* conspiracy? In some cases *yes*. Surely in the age of Hitler and Saddam Hussein we don't need to prove that some wars are deliberately engineered (even if the engineers do not always get what they want). And history provides us with at least one instance of man-made famine - and a famine moreover which was *deliberately* engineered to break the resistance of the Ukrainian peasantry. I refer to the terror-famine of 1932-3. Stalin starved the peasants by the simple expedient of requisitioning their grain. People died by the million.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup>Robert Conquest, the historian of this catastrophe, concedes that this is difficult to believe partly because of the 'not unreasonable presumption' that 'there have been many famines ... that here was another, with natural causes perhaps exacerbated by the policies of the Government, but

---

<sup>27</sup> See Robert Conquest, 1986, *the Harvest of Sorrow*, particularly chs. 11, 12 & 18.

<sup>28</sup> You may think that starving millions of people to death is not the sort of thing that can be done in secret, and hence that the actions of Stalin and his confederates cannot have constituted a conspiracy. You would be wrong. The initial decision was taken in secret, many of the measures taken to enforce the grain requisition were not made public, the rationale for the policy was concealed (even from those who were supposed to execute it) and the whole thing was successfully hushed up. As George Orwell wrote in 1945, 'Huge events like the Ukraine famine of 1933, involving the deaths of millions of people, have actually escaped the attention of the majority of English Russophiles'. (Orwell, 'Notes on Nationalism' in Orwell, 1970, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3, p. 420.)

with no reason to believe that the Government procured the famine of express malice, unless proven to the hilt.' However reasonable this presumption may seem, in this case it was wrong. Stalin did it 'on purpose'<sup>29</sup>. The consequences were intended.

Another fallback position is what might be called 'conspiratorial Occamism'. Conspiracies do occur and some of them even succeed. On occasion they even have a major impact. But Occam dictates that we should be very cautious in positing conspiracies. Occam's Razor is the general principle that in choosing between hypotheses the simplest is (usually) the best. Conspiracies tend to be complex affairs. People have to get together to agree on a plan, they must mobilize resources and maintain a veil of secrecy. All this takes some doing. So conspiracy theories will usually be more complex than their rivals and hence should be rejected.

Not so. For the non-conspiracy theories may be *more* complex. They may require an elaborate and unlikely sequence of coincidences or complicated social mechanisms which *duplicate* the appearance of conspiracy<sup>30</sup>. Moreover if there are people in the frame with a known propensity to conspire, considerations of simplicity go out the window. Consider the COINTELPRO program run by the FBI in the fifties and sixties. This was a sort of hatchery of conspiracies designed to harass communists and other alleged subversives. Suppose the husband of a civil rights worker received anonymous letter suggesting that his wife had been having an affair. The obvious explanation would be that the letter was genuine (if malicious) and had been written by a mutual acquaintance. As for the idea that the letter was a forgery planted by the FBI to undermine his marriage - well, that would be just too fantastic for words! Would the U.S. government, or even the great but sinister J. Edgar Hoover descend to such petty malice? The husband, like a true disciple of Occam would opt for the simpler hypothesis and institute divorce proceedings.

---

<sup>29</sup> Conquest, *Harvest*, p. 323

<sup>30</sup> I do not however deny the existence of such mechanisms. *Quasi*-conspiracies in which groups of people act in concert without getting together to conspire are probably quite common. Furthermore their workings are a topic of considerable interest.

*But in some cases the FBI mounted just such a conspiracy*<sup>31</sup>. There really were husbands who cut themselves off from truth when they cut away at complexity and thereby ruined their lives. Again, consider the scheme, seriously proposed by G. Gordon Liddy, to compromise delegates at the Democrats' Convention in Miami by luring them aboard yachts where they were to be seduced by 'high-class call girls'. The risks attendant on this idea were colossal, the likely results paltry and the whole thing was, of course, morally unsavory. But to a true conspirator like Liddy such philistine cost/benefit considerations did not apply. (Fortunately - or perhaps unfortunately - this enterprising scheme was vetoed by Attorney General John Mitchell. It was, he thought, both cheaper and safer to burglarize the Democratic Headquarters in the Watergate Building.) When it comes to conspiracy, the J. Edgar Hoovers and G. Gordon Liddys of this world *like* complexity. Devious and covert methods become a habit and eventually metamorphose into ends in themselves. They enjoy the skullduggery for its own sake<sup>32</sup>.

So what is the upshot? The belief that conspiracy theories are somehow superstitious is itself a superstition. Conspiracies abound, some successful others not. They often play a role in the shaping of events. Popper does not provide us with a theoretical reason to doubt the testimony of history. The 'conspiracy theory' he denies is indeed false, but its falsehood casts no doubt on conspiracy theories of this or that event. Nor does Popper provide a decent argument for a generalized scepticism about conspiracies. Where the evidence suggests a conspiracy, we are quite at liberty to believe in it.

---

<sup>31</sup> I do not wish to suggest that Hoover directly authorized this operation - merely that he created an organization in which this sort of operation was routinely authorized. See Fried, 1990, *Nightmare in Red*, pp. 189-192.

<sup>32</sup> An eminent professor of my acquaintance - it was John Passmore - used to reject conspiracy theories put about by his more left-wing colleagues on the grounds that 'they' - the FBI, the CIA, the US government - would never do such a thing, i.e. something so absurdly, elaborately and wickedly conspiratorial. After Watergate, he said, this argument cut no ice.

### 9. An Excuse for Popper?

Popper still has his defenders even in the Antipodes. Alan Musgrave may be a critical disciple but he is still a disciple. He offers the following reply. To be sure 'the conspiracy theory' as described by Popper is absurd. But that does not mean that it is wrong to criticize it. For many people are influenced by theories which in their lucid moments they would disavow. Despite its absurdity 'the conspiracy theory' has a host of unconscious devotees. By dragging it into the daylight and showing how silly it is, Popper has performed an intellectual service.

What is the outward and visible sign of unconscious devotion to 'the conspiracy theory of society'? Surely an excessive fondness for conspiracy theories of this and that. But the problem is that you can be far gone in conspiratorial paranoia *without* believing in 'the conspiracy theory of society', even subconsciously. If you think that some things are not to be explained by conspiracy, that explanation does not stop once you have isolated a group of conspirators, or that what happens is not always what the conspirators conspired to bring about, then you do not believe in 'the conspiracy theory of society'. I suppose you might be accused of believing it subconsciously if you assented verbally to the above list of beliefs but could not come up with any instances. But you could have an excessive, indeed an insane, fondness for conspiracy theories, and still pass this test.

Perhaps there are some conspiracy theories that are so far-fetched that they would not be posited at all without a tacit belief in 'the conspiracy theory of society'. Procopius' theory that the Emperor Justinian was an incarnation of the devil might be an example. (See Procopius, *Secret History*, ch. XVII.) Procopius' proof that Justinian (like his partner Theodora) was a demon consists in the 'enormity of the evils he brought upon mankind'. 'An accurate reckoning of all those he destroyed would be impossible', but whole countries were 'made desolate of inhabitants'. Given that so many people died as a result of his activities, he was obviously an enemy of the human race (and a singularly effective one too). Now who is the greatest enemy of the human race? Why, the devil of course! Therefore ... This was a conspiracy theory since Procopius thought (or affected to think)

that there were two demons, not one, at the head of the Roman state, Justinian and Theodora. They 'laid their heads together to see how they could most easily and quickly destroy the race and deeds of men; and assuming human bodies became man-demons, and so convulsed the world.' (Procopius, *The Secret History*, p. 63.) Here indeed we have a conspiracy theory which does not make much sense without *the* conspiracy theory. Procopius assumes that large events - the desolation and death inflicted by Justinian's defeats and his partial and costly victories (for as Gibbon puts it 'the victories and the losses of Justinian were alike pernicious to mankind') - are to be explained by the 'discovery of men or groups who are interested in [their] occurrence and who have planned and conspired to bring [them] about.'<sup>33</sup> But we don't need a Popper to tell us what is wrong with Procopius' reasoning. Gibbon, relying on the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment, did a perfectly decent job. 'Ambiguous actions are imputed to the worst motives: error is confounded with guilt, accident with design, [and] the emperor alone is made responsible for the faults of his officers, the disorders of the times, and the corruption of his subjects'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, he is also made responsible for the actions of his opponents!<sup>35</sup> Procopius forgets about unintended consequences and assumes throughout that the results of Justinian's actions were not only foreseen, but *planned*.

But if Popper performs some slight service in exposing the errors of Procopius and his like (and the service is indeed slight, since there are not that many historians as crazed with malice as Procopius) this is far outweighed by the spurious justification he provides for a general scepticism about conspiracy. This can seriously distort our understanding of history. I cite just one example. Popper himself admits that 'Lenin's revolution' was a

---

<sup>33</sup> Popper, 1966, *The Open Society*, vol. 2, p. 94. I should stress however, that although Procopius' thesis looks like a paranoid fantasy unless we assume something like Popper's 'conspiracy theory of society', Procopius' conspiratorial thesis is still *compatible* with the falsehood of Popper's 'conspiracy theory'.

<sup>34</sup> See Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chs. XL & XLI-XLIII. The true explanation of the disasters of Justinian's reign is fairly straightforward: he had ambitious schemes of conquest which he could not afford to pay for and he did not trust his best general. Belisarius might win great victories, but after his recall the troops would dissolve into gangs of brigands for want of pay and his conquests would be driven into revolt by rapacious tax gatherers. Long wars of attrition were the result.

<sup>35</sup> I am not saying, of course, that people cannot conspire to influence events by tricking or manipulating their opponents, nor that such conspiracies do not sometimes succeed. But the idea that Justinian *conspired* to bring about the actions of Totila, Chosroes and Zabergan looks utterly silly unless we suppose that something like 'the conspiracy theory of society' is true.

conspiratorial one. And this is amply borne out by material that has come to light since the fall of Communism. But Richard Pipes complains that in the sixties a group of 'revisionist' historians, motivated by just the kind of *marxisante* bias in favour of the 'socio-economic interpretation of history' that Popper himself affects<sup>36</sup>, came to regard the October *putsch* as 'a genuine mass revolution driven from below'<sup>37</sup>. Pipes offers various reasons for this, one being the Cartesian superstition that big events cannot have little causes and that 'events affecting millions [must be] willed by millions'. In other words, the kind of presumption against conspiracy theories that Popper is concerned to propagate, led (if Pipes is to be believed) to a positive industry of scholarly error. A general scepticism about conspiracy allows people in high places to dodge responsibility for their actions and in some cases to get away with murder.

#### **10. Deception, Self-Deception and the Conspirators.**

But one question remains. Given that it is superstitious to suppose that there is something intrinsically wrong with conspiracy theories, why do so many people - including so many conspirators - believe, or profess, this superstition? Well, one reason is self-interest, or more broadly, institutional interest. If you are in fact a conspirator, especially if you are engaged in a conspiracy the public would disapprove of, it is obviously useful to subscribe to the theory that there are no such things. But I think there is a little more to it than that. Sometimes the scepticism is sincere even when the sceptic is an active conspirator. Some conspirators are taken in by an enthymeme: 'Conspiracies are bad, therefore I am not a conspirator'. But conspiracies are not always bad, and when they are it is the unspoken premise ('I do not do bad things.'<sup>38</sup>) that is at fault. But the real reason for the widespread

---

<sup>36</sup> '*Marxisante*'? Popper? Well yes. Consider the following: 'I should have mentioned my indebtedness to Marx, *who was one of the first critics of the conspiracy theory*, and one of the first to analyze the unintended consequences of the voluntary actions of people acting in certain social situations. Marx said quite definitely and clearly that the capitalist is as much caught in the network of the social situation (or the 'social system') as is the worker...' See *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 125n.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Pipes 'Seventy-five Years On: the Great October Revolution as Clandestine *Coup d'Etat*. *TLS*, 6/11/92. Conquest makes a similar point in an article in the same issue.

<sup>38</sup> I suspect that many politicians are deeply convinced of their own public rectitude because in private life they are honest and benign, loving wives, faithful husbands, considerate bosses and adorable grandmas and grandpops. A financier of torturers would have to be a slavering fiend, and since this does not fit in with their self-image, they conclude that they cannot be financing torture. This despite the fact that they give money to unsavory types who spend it on beatings, burnings and electric shocks to the genitals. (Even torture requires a budget.)



self-deception is that it is easy to slip into a conspiracy without really noticing. This is partly because people have an unduly theatrical conception of conspiracy. They think that conspiracy requires oaths, passwords, secret codes and other such exotic paraphernalia, and that it is the province of spies and Mafiosi. But conspiracy can be a matter of a few words, a phone-call, a look or a cosy chat between old friends. Consider this passage from C.S. Lewis' 'The Inner Ring'<sup>39</sup>.

‘To nine out of ten of you, [temptation] will come, when it does come, in no very dramatic colors. Obviously bad men, obviously threatening or bribing, will almost certainly not appear. Over a drink or a cup of coffee, disguised as a triviality and sandwiched between two jokes, from the lips of a man, or woman, whom you have recently been getting to know better and whom you hope to know better still - just at the moment when you are anxious not to appear crude or naif or a prig - the hint will come. It will be the hint of something not quite in accordance with the technical rules of fair play ... but something, says your new friend, which “we” - and at the word “we” you try not to blush for mere pleasure - something “we always do”.

Lewis thinks that most people are subject to a dangerous passion, the source of much of the sin and evil in the world, the desire to be in with the in crowd, or as he puts it, ‘the inner ring’. What he is describing is how this desire can tempt you into a criminal, or at least an immoral, conspiracy. But whatever the merits of Lewis’s moral psychology, I don’t think there can be much doubt that conspiracies, when they occur, are often just like that.

To reinforce this point, consider the famous ‘smoking gun’ of the Watergate case, the conversation of June 23rd 1972, in which Richard Nixon crossed the line into *criminal* conspiracy (and which he unwisely had immortalized on tape). What Nixon is telling his

---

<sup>39</sup> Reprinted in C.S. Lewis, 1965, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*.

subordinates to do is to call in the CIA to obstruct the FBI in a criminal investigation. According to Theodore H. White<sup>40</sup>, what Nixon actually said was this:

‘Right, fine’.

‘All right, fine ... well, we protected Helms from one Hell of a lot of things.’

‘Play it tough. That’s the way to play it, and that’s the way we are going to play it.’

‘ Well, what the Hell - did Mitchell know about this?’

Granted, this would sound rather more conspiratorial if we had Haldeman’s side of the exchange, if we had more of Nixon’s remarks, or if the words were set in context; still it is easy to see how Nixon could slip into conspiracy without really realizing it, and how he could sincerely believe (at least to begin with) that he was not a crook or even an unindicted co-conspirator. His conspiracy was double-wrapped in a coating of executive waffle, garnished with ums and ahs and spiced with expletive deleteds. For a while at least he was able to avert his eyes from what was inside.

So we have the wrong image of conspiracy. For one thing conspiracies can be innocent or even laudable. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with covert plans or covert action, or if there is, the ends can (sometimes) justify the means. Suppose that some tyrant - let us call him the emir of Antioch - has a bad human rights record. But he wants Antioch to get the Chairmanship of some prestigious UN subcommittee. The International Secretariat of Amnesty International decides to get a little extra leverage by embarrassing the emir just before the crucial vote. They organize a lot of letters but hold

---

<sup>40</sup> White, Theodore, H., 1975, *Breach of Faith: the Fall of Richard Nixon*, New York, Reader’s Digest, p. 164. White is too much the courtier, too much the patriot, too much the moralist and not enough of a cynic to be a really good historian, but he does at least give a decent run-down of events. Besides it is the only book on Watergate that I happen to possess.

back dispatch until the right moment. They line up a lot of sympathetic Muslim luminaries to denounce him. They tip off some influential journalists about the coming story. All this is done in secret. Finally they carefully time the release of a damning report. When the storm of bad publicity bursts upon the emir's head, he rightly feels that he is the victim of a conspiracy. Yet the International Secretariat has acted with perfect propriety. Conspirators therefore can be a set of righteous individuals secretly planning a covert course of action. Even when the conspiracies are genuinely sinister we tend to take too lurid a view. Don't think of stage villains and ranting Richard III's. Don't even think of the prawn dinner in *Apocalypse Now* with the clear if euphemistic order to 'terminate the Colonel's mission ... with extreme prejudice'. That is still a bit too overblown. Think, if you like, of Nixon or (if you must have a myth) of the scene in *Robocop II* where the suave executives of Omni-Consumer Products conspire to murder the Mayor of Detroit. They talk in oblique terms of 'surveillance capabilities' and 'how far we are prepared to go' and the scene ends with the nicely ambiguous instruction 'There must be no witnesses.' In real life the language of conspiracy can be as understated as that. Once you understand what conspiracies are like, you will realize that there are a lot of them about and you may even be a conspirator yourself. Whether this is good or bad depends upon the details of the conspiracy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Collingwood, R.G., 1946, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
2. Conquest, Robert, 1986, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, London, Hutchinson, paperback edn. 1988, London, Arrow Books.
3. Conquest, Robert, 1992, 'The Party in the Dock' *Times Literary Supplement*, 6/11/92.
4. Dray, W., 1980, *Perspectives on History*, London and Henley, Routledge Kegan Paul.
5. Feyerabend, P.K., 1975, 'Popper's *Objective Knowledge*', *Inquiry* vol. 17. Reprinted in Feyerabend, 1981.
6. Feyerabend, P.K., 1981, *Philosophical Papers* vol. 2, *Problems of Empiricism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
7. Fried, Richard M., 1990, *Nightmare in Red: the McCarthy Era in Perspective*, New York, Oxford University Press.
8. Gibbon, Edward. n.d., *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol 2, New York, Modern Library (Random House).
9. Goldman, Alvin, 1992, 'In Defence of Simulation Theory', *Mind and Language*, Vol. 7. nos. 1 & 2.
10. Hervey, John, Lord, 1952, *Lord Hervey's Memoirs*, ed. Romney Sedgwick, London, William Kimber.
11. Hill, B.W., 1989, *Sir Robert Walpole*, London, Hamish Hamilton.
11. Hitchens, Christopher, 1988, *Prepared for the Worst*, London, Hogarth Press.
12. Lakatos, Imre, 1971, 'The History of Science and its Rational Reconstructions', reprinted in Lakatos, 1978.
13. Lakatos, Imre, 1974, 'Popper on Demarcation and Induction' in Schilpp ed. 1974, reprinted in Lakatos 1978.
14. Lakatos, Imre, 1978, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical papers*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
15. Lewis, C.S., 1965, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, London, Fontana.
16. Macauley, Thomas, Lord, 1898, *History of England*, 5 vols. London, Longmann's Green.
17. Orwell, George, 1970, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
18. Pipes, Richard., 1992, 'Seventy-five Years On: The Great October Revolution as a Clandestine *Coup d'Etat*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6/11/92.

19. Popper, Sir K.R., 1948, 'Prediction and Prophecy', *10th International Congress of Philosophy*, reprinted in Popper, 1972a. All references to this reprint.
20. Popper, Sir K.R. 1949, 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition', *The Rationalist Annual*, reprinted in Popper 1972a. All references to this reprint.
21. Popper, Sir K.R., 1957, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London & Henley, Routledge Kegan Paul.
22. Popper, Sir K.R., 1966, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the Aftermath*, 5th edn. London & Henley, Routledge Kegan Paul.
23. Popper, Sir K.R., 1972a, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 4th edn. London & Henley, Routledge Kegan Paul.
24. Popper, Sir K.R., 1972b, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
25. Procopius of Caesarea, 1961, *Secret History*, trans. Atwater, Anne Arbor, University of Michigan Press.
26. Schilpp, P.A. ed. 1974, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, La Salle, Open Court.
27. Thompson, E.P., 1982, *Zero Option*, London, Merlin.
28. Thompson, E.P., 1985, *The Heavy Dancers*, New York, Pantheon.
29. Turnbull, M., 1988, *The Spycatcher Trial*, London, Heinemann. References to the paperback edition 1989.
30. van der Zee, H. & B., 1988, *Revolution in the Family*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
31. White, Theodore, H., 1975, *Breach of Faith: the Fall of Richard Nixon*, New York, Reader's Digest.