

# The Response of Cultural Studies to 9/11 Skepticism in American Popular Culture

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## Abstract

This article examines the response to 9/11 skepticism by scholars in the field of cultural studies. A survey of recent books on 9/11 in American popular culture shows little consideration of 9/11 conspiracy theories in popular culture, and no consideration of legitimate forms of skepticism. In addition, cultural studies critics such as Claire Birchall, Jack Bratich, Mark Fenster, and Jodi Dean have theorized the discourse of 9/11 conspiracy theories with an emphasis on how the conspiracies are articulated but not whether there are legitimate forms of skepticism. To address this absence in the scholarship, this article considers some of the omissions and distortions of the *9/11 Commission Report*. It concludes by citing recent articles in mainstream academic journals that strongly indict the official narrative of 9/11, and suggests the potential value of 9/11 skepticism to an anarchist cultural studies.

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The American public's reaction to the *9/11 Commission Report*, published in July 2004, showed varying degrees of skepticism over the veracity of the report and the testimony of government and military officials.<sup>1</sup> While many leading figures in mainstream American liberal and progressive media criticized the *9/11 Commission Report* when it was published — *Harper's* magazine ran a cover story in October 2004 describing the report as a “whitewash,” a “cheat and a fraud” (DeMott, 2004); *Village Voice* correspondent James Ridgeway suggested a proper interrogation of the White House “might have brought down a government” (Ridgeway, 2005, p. 168) — two years later progressive media authored vitriolic retorts to denominations of the self-styled “9/11 Truth Movement,” members of which want a new investigation into the events of September 11, 2001. Though ostensibly, at one time, both radical critics and the 9/11 Truth Movement wanted a new investigation of 9/11 — in addition, two-thirds of New York City residents asked for a new investigation in a 2004 poll (Zogby, 2004) — most leftists have since distanced themselves from any interrogation of 9/11. The anarchist response to 9/11 skepticism resembles the liberal/progressive response, and is exemplified by the reaction of Noam Chomsky. In a lecture delivered at MIT on October 18, 2001, Chomsky spoke of the September 11 attacks: “It is astonishing to me how weak the evidence was [against the alleged perpetrators],” he said. “And it ended up about where it started, with a *prima facie* case.” He continued: “So let’s assume that it’s true. So let’s assume that, it looked obvious the first day, still does, that the actual perpetrators come from the radical Islamic, here called fundamentalist networks, of which the bin Laden network is undoubtedly a significant part. . . . Whether [Islamic terrorists] were involved or not, nobody knows. It doesn’t really matter much” (quoted in Zwicker, 2006, p. 202). Later, in his book *9–11*, which as an international best-seller sold over 300,000 copies, Chomsky

<sup>1</sup> A Zogby poll in May 2006 showed 42% of Americans believe “that the US government and its 9/11 Commission concealed or refused to investigate critical evidence that contradicts their official explanation of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.” A Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll in August 2006 showed 36% of Americans believe their government was in some manner complicit with the 9/11 attacks. A New York Times/CBS News poll from October 2006 showed only 16% of Americans believe members of the Bush Administration are telling the truth about pre-9/11 intelligence, while 81% believe the government is either “hiding something” or “mostly lying.” A September 2007 Zogby poll found 51% of Americans want Congress to probe the actions of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney regarding their “actions before, during and after the 9/11 attacks.”

again expressed indifference at the paucity of evidence against the alleged conspirators of 9/11: “Nevertheless, despite what must be the most intensive international intelligence investigation in history, evidence about the perpetrators of 9–11 has been hard to find. . . . Nevertheless, despite the thin evidence, the initial conclusion about 9–11 is presumably correct” (Chomsky, 2002, pp. 120–121). Because of his celebrated status, Chomsky was strenuously pursued by 9/11 skeptics to endorse their cause. “Even if it [the idea of US government complicity with the 9/11 attacks] were true, which is extremely unlikely,” Chomsky asserted at a public appearance, “who cares? I mean, it doesn’t have any significance. . . . It’s just taking energy away from serious issues for ones that don’t matter” (quoted in Petersen, 2007). After the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011, Chomsky made statements that suggested a softening of his position on 9/11 skepticism. He declared an absence of “serious” evidence against Osama bin Laden for the crime of 9/11, and he described bin Laden’s “confession” to the crime of 9/11 “rather like my confession that I won the Boston Marathon. He boasted of what he regarded as a great achievement” (Chomsky, 2011).

The unanswered questions surrounding 9/11 emerged in American popular culture as both conspiracy theories and legitimate skepticism. Conspiracy theories with no basis in fact include: the notion that 4,000 Jews did not report to work at the World Trade Center on 9/11; the belief that no airplane hit the Pentagon; the “pod” theories; the theory that directed energy weapons from space toppled the World Trade Center towers; and all manner of theories incorporating holograms or special effects in the television coverage of the attacks. The evidence easily dismisses these theories, and yet they are commonly enumerated by mainstream media reports that do not wish to discuss legitimate forms of skepticism. Of the several academic books that have been published on the subject of 9/11 in American popular culture, none has addressed 9/11 skepticism in film and television, and only a few have noted in passing the conspiracy theories. For example, in *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, Douglas Kellner notes how 9/11 Commission chair Thomas Kean’s “involvement with [*The Path to 9/11*] seriously discredited the former governor, and perhaps the 9/11 Commission he chaired, which was long under attack for not more vigorously investigating the 9/11 attacks” (2010, p. 110). Kellner does not explore the criticism of the 9/11 Commission. Instead, in a footnote on the film *United 93*, he writes,

Neither the film nor [director Paul] Greengrass on the DVD commentary addresses the conspiracy theories that suggest the government did not act to prevent 9/11 because it was planning to exploit the tragedy to push through its rightwing extremist agenda. The Wikipedia “9/11 Conspiracies” site lists salient points and sources of various conspiracy analyses and arguments against them. . . (pp. 127–128n7)

Similarly, Stephen Prince, in his book *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*, acknowledges the compromises of the 9/11 Commission — referring to the Bush administration’s actions as “startling” (2009, p. 143), and noting how once “an investigation was under way, the Bush administration continued to behave as if it had things to hide” (p. 144). Indeed, the 9/11 Commission chair and vice chair, Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, said the White House was the “chief obstacle” to their investigation (2006, p. 17). Prince even acknowledges the confessions of Khalid Sheikh Mohamed (KSM), the alleged mastermind of 9/11, sometimes “were wildly improbable” (Prince, 2009, p. 240). Prince, unlike Kellner, profiles some of the conspiracy films, but does not take seriously any of their claims. Jeffrey Melnick (2009), in *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction*, also discusses the conspiracy films but declares “the origins and evolution of these challenges to the ‘official story’ of 9/11 are outside my scope” (p. 40), and celebrates the “pioneering work” of Snopes.com (p. 26). Ultimately, Melnick dismisses all 9/11 skepticism as “rumors” most likely “to ‘capture’ young people” (p. 41). “Many of these rumors,” claims Melnick, “are rooted in the simple doubt (or profound disbelief) that *this* could have happened *here*” (p. 26; italics in original). That these “rumors” have transformed into “a major social force [the 9/11 Truth Movement]” Melnick attributes to the way the rumors “take the chaos of that day and map an intelligent design onto it” (p. 41). This “grassroots rebellion” is not to be taken seriously on its own terms, but rather as a “revolt not only against governmental control over 9/11 inquiry but also as a critique of the centralized control of American media held by corporate actors such as Clear Channel” (p. 43). Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill, in their introduction to *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, note how “many elements of American popular culture have been implicitly and explicitly interrogating the attacks and their aftermath since almost the moment they happened” (Schopp & Hill 2009, p. 13). Schopp later admits he read an arti-

cle on 9/11 conspiracy theories in *New York Magazine* and can no longer “dismiss the possibilities as easily as [he] once might have” (Schopp 2009, p. 263). Despite this statement, Schopp elsewhere in the same article grimaces over the “subway graffiti and the stickers plastered throughout the stations asking that we reopen September 11” (p. 262). Finally, Gordon B. Arnold, in *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television, and Politics*, spends little time on 9/11 conspiracies and suggests their “most obvious point of comparison is with the film *Capricorn One*, which had depicted how a NASA mission to Mars, complete with three astronauts, could be convincingly faked” (2008, p. 168), a compression of 9/11 skepticism that admits only the most ludicrous and discredited theories (in this case, the allusion is to theories suggesting the planes on 9/11 were holograms cloaking missiles, or to no-plane-at-the-Pentagon theories). Therefore, the combined reaction to 9/11 skepticism by academics in book-length treatises on 9/11 in American popular culture treats the omissions and distortions of the *9/11 Commission Report* as nothing more than passing curiosities for which the reader should consult Wikipedia or Snopes.com. Such a response is not a condemnation of the scholars above, who are more than capable, but rather the social climate in which they are publishing, which is extremely hostile to treatments of 9/11 that do not reflect the Manichean rhetoric of the Bush Administration and the ideologically vapid propaganda of the US national security state.

It is the contention of this article that an anarchist approach to cultural studies must confront the glaring omissions and distortions of the *9/11 Commission Report*, for several reasons: first, a proper historical accounting of 9/11 requires a more comprehensive and independent inquiry into 9/11 than the 9/11 Commission provided (which will be demonstrated below); second, a comprehensive exploration of 9/11 reveals some of the covert machinations of the national security state (both US and foreign), and would contribute to an anarchist analysis of the function of the State in capitalist societies; third, the logic of progressive avoidance, both in popular media and academia, assumes the omissions and distortions of the Report are inconsequential, and this logic is irrational because we do not know how consequential the omissions of the Report are; fourth, the possibility exists of treasonous activity within the Bush White House or some faction of the national security state, which hid from serious interrogation with classificatory processes and legal maneuvering fitting of the “imperial presidency” (Savage, 2008); fifth,

9/11 has been used as justification for widespread torture, imperial wars of aggression, and the suspension of the US constitution, and as such it should be subject to more, not less, academic scrutiny; and finally, the avoidance of 9/11 skepticism in mainstream academic research betrays the fundamental responsibilities of higher education “not only to search for the truth regardless of where it may lead but also to educate students to make authority politically and morally accountable; [higher education] is obliged to expand both academic freedom and the possibility and promise of the university as a bastion of democratic inquiry, values, and politics, even as these are necessarily refashioned at the beginning of the new millennium” (Giroux, 2010, p. 95).

### Cultural Studies, Conspiracy Theory, and 9/11

Almost immediately following 9/11, criticisms of the official narrative were treated as conspiracy theories. A tendency to conflate conspiracy theories — those ridiculous and sometimes hateful theories that are incongruent with the evidence — with legitimate skepticism prevented an honest and comprehensive assessment of the event from taking place in the official corridors of government and academia. A throng of recent work in academic (largely Marxist) cultural studies has examined the psychological, political, and social characteristics of conspiracy theory, some of which discuss 9/11 theories. Four of the latest books that represent the cultural studies “approach” to conspiracy theory are Jack Z. Bratich’s *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, Clare Birchall’s *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, Jodi Dean’s *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, and Mark Fenster’s second edition of *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Though cultural studies attempts to take conspiracy theorizing more seriously than other approaches have, “it also comes perilously close to ignoring the micropolitical function of the category [conspiracy theory/ist]” (Husting and Orr, 2007, p. 138). Cultural studies of conspiracy theory tend to avoid whether the specific theory in question is at all credible for the more palliative debate of how the theory functions discursively. Husting and Orr capture the basic problem with the cultural studies approach: “Instead of questioning the coherence of ‘conspiracy theorizing’ as a category, or pointing to the reframing power of the phrase, these analyses come

dangerously close to reifying it. Lumping together alien abductees, the *X-Files*, and concerns about corporate or political corruption erases distinctions between varying concerns of conspiracy, treating them all as part of the ‘freak show’ of American culture in the post-modern moment” (p. 143). Pelkmans and Machold rightly focus on “the convergence of truth and use value” in the deployment of the label “conspiracy theory/ist,” which recognizes that the label can be an effective means of “discrediting opponents or rallying supporters” (2011, p. 68). Instead, Pelkmans and Machold wish to foreground “the precise manner in which such theories are embedded in socio-political fields” (p. 68). They use the 9/11 Truth Movement as an example of how “theories of conspiracy produced by those who are not in power tend to remain ‘conspiracy theories,’ no matter their location along the truth-axis” (p. 75). Even though authors in the 9/11 Truth Movement have produced “numerous volumes on the faults in the official account,” these “theories continue to be easily dismissed as conspiracy theories” (p. 75). I would characterize the cultural studies practitioners below as a variant of this dynamic that classifies 9/11 skepticism in one of two ways: by assuming the label “conspiracy theory” applies to all 9/11 skepticism, they condemn even demonstrable falsehoods to what Orr and Husting call the “freak show” of postmodern American culture; and by focusing on how the theories are able to circulate, rather than whether the theories possess any epistemological legitimacy, they avoid questions regarding the very definition of conspiracy theory.

Claire Birchall’s study of popular knowledge, for example, uses a deconstructionist methodology:

I wanted to write a book that could open up a different way of responding to popular knowledge: one that moves beyond the truth or falsity of statements produced by a particular knowledge and the question of why people might choose to invest in them. Working against the grain of much academic work on fan communities and the idea of empowered consumers (in my field of cultural studies especially), I wanted to focus on the knowledge believed in, rather than those who believe. (2006, p. xii)

Popular invocations of conspiracy theory often focus on “those who believe,” dismissing their beliefs on *a priori* psychological grounds rather than exploring the evidence for those beliefs. Steve

Clarke identifies this “dispositional” error, sometimes called the “fundamental attribution error” or the “correspondence bias,” as that which obscures “situational” evidence in conspiracy theories; that is, conspiracy theorists tend to support what Imre Lakatos calls “degenerating research programmes,” or research projects that continue despite contradictory evidence, because they believe so strongly that the people involved are malevolent and omnipotent (Clarke, 2002, p. 145). The problem with academic work predicated on the psychology of the conspiracists (dating back to Richard Hofstadter’s famous “paranoid style”) is that too often it constructs *a priori* arguments about the conspiracy in question. In the case of 9/11, there are countless examples of *a priori* suppositions used to counter the evidence presented by skeptics: *somebody in the conspiracy would have talked, the conspiracy would involve too many people, the US government is not competent enough*, and so on. Such claims are intellectually lazy and they avoid an assessment of the known evidence.

Birchall’s focus on “the knowledge believed in” and not the psychology of the believer is an improvement over the typically dismissive academic appraisal of conspiracy theory and other popular knowledges. Birchall’s approach is more problematic, however, when it seeks to move “beyond the truth or falsity of statements” produced by so-called conspiracy theory and gossip. While there is no single definition of “popular knowledges,” Birchall argues “they all offer understandings of the world not bounded by . . . ‘official’, legitimated knowledge” (p. 21). Birchall then frames popular knowledge such as conspiracy theory in terms of its ability to perform deconstructive self-reflexivity. Conspiracy theory, she writes, “can suggest that all knowledge is only ever ‘theory’; that the relationship between a sign and its referent is necessarily inflected by imaginary processes; and that any transcendental truth claims rely on contingent strategies of legitimation” (p. 73). Birchall sees her framing of conspiracy theory as addressing a “blind spot” in the cultural studies debate, because in her epistemology conspiracy theory performs “a self-reflexivity about the very possibility of interpretation, of being able to say anything about one’s positionality, agenda, prejudices” (p. 84).

Birchall’s treatment of 9/11 skepticism is deficient in its declared intention to go “beyond the truth or falsity of statements.” Instead of discussing the compromised 9/11 Commission and the aporias of its report, Birchall surveys a collection of obvious hoaxes and somewhat interesting anomalies, positing an explanatory framework for 9/11

conspiracies with an *a priori* assumption: “people find familiar ways of knowing to understand and discuss [9/11] perhaps *because not in spite* of its potentially disruptive nature,” an explanation that echoes Melnick above. Thus,

The energy for such theories can be found in the absence, more than the presence, of evidence or answers: the lack of a published photograph of Flight 77 after having crashed into the Pentagon arouses suspicion; the late mobilization of scrambler planes raises eyebrows; the President’s lack of reaction to the news that America was under attack during a low-key visit to a school suggests to some that this news was ‘no news’ to him. (p. 56)

The reaction to this jumble of oddities from 9/11, Birchall suggests, resembles what Timothy Melley calls “agency panic”: “Conspiracy theories flood in to fill the void of a nebulous, dispersed terror or fear” (Birchall, 2006, p. 62). It is true that the absence of evidence, such as definitive video footage of Flight 77 hitting the Pentagon, has inspired some half-baked conspiracy theories. Instead of measuring the apparent substance of these theories, Birchall ascribes their existence to the desire of conspiracists to counteract the Bush regime’s program of fear-mongering. This is often the case, but should cultural theorists lump together all forms of 9/11 skepticism under this amorphous attempt to fight the future? By falling back on the “potentially disruptive nature” of 9/11 as the prime mover for conspiracy theories, Birchall is awfully close to invoking psychology, not evidence, as the determining factor.

Jack Bratich’s focus is on “how the risky thought encapsulated in the conspiracy theory problem is generated discursively, under what conditions, and to what ends” (2008, p. 9). His text comes the closest of those examined in this article to an “anarchist” form of cultural studies. Conspiracy theory, he contends, “functions as an intolerable line and an antagonism,” and the “panic here is over a particular *form of thought* (and its potential links to action)” (p. 11). An important contribution to Foucaultian governmentality literature, Bratich’s text examines how conspiracy panics “‘problematize’ conspiracy theories as a relation between power and thought” (p. 13). Instead of asking whether a theory deserves to be identified as a conspiracy theory, Bratich asks, “What commitment to rationality exists when a narrative is identified as a conspiracy theory? Whose

authority is affirmed?” (p. 16). Bratich argues that “a *will-to-moderation* permeates our political rationality, and that conspiracy panics have been a significant symptom of this will in action,” an incisive and important observation to be sure, and it is accompanied, thankfully, by recognition of the “impossibility of a totalizing notion of conspiracy panics” (pp. 16–17, 23).

When he turns to 9/11 conspiracy theories, Bratich prefaces his analysis with a comment that seems unaware of the various public opinion polls taken since 9/11 showing degrees of skepticism over the official narrative (see endnote 2 in this article): “Despite the seeming national consensus over the events,” he writes, “the skeptical narratives persisted” (p. 131). While his discussion of the 9/11 Truth Movement is more comprehensive than any other academic’s, it remains informed by his Foucaultian method and therefore ultimately not concerned with whether the 9/11 conspiracy theories deserve the epithet but rather how they were “generated discursively”: “what is at stake [in the 9/11 Truth Movement] is not which narrative is true but which body is authorized to make statements within the regime of truth” (p. 135). Retaining this epistemological posture, Bratich nonetheless identifies one salient reason for intellectuals on the Left to engage conspiracy theory/ist accusations: “The 9/11 Truth Movement was precisely discomforting to the Left because of its indiscernible political possibilities” (p. 142). Whether the Left believes pursuing questions about 9/11 is a politically futile activity, or whether the Left was simply bullied into being silent by a jingoistic mainstream press in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Bratich expresses succinctly the basic question that drives the analysis in the latter half of this paper and that should be addressed to those on the Left who berate amateur attempts, however often misguided, to pursue the unanswered questions about 9/11:

We can, however, question this limited range of investigation. For instance, much leftist ink has been spilled (actual and virtual) on the lies, cover-ups, and misinformation that led up to and continued after the Iraq invasion. Why has there been so much attention to those deeds and so little to 9/11? (p. 153)

Why, indeed?

Political scientist Jodi Dean invokes Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand the 9/11 Truth Movement. “The conflict over 9/11 truth,” she argues, “is a battle over facts, knowledge, who knew, who knows,

and who has the right to know” (2009, p. 146). She frames her discussion with the following question, “So does the push to uncover the truth of September 11 continue the democratic project of undermining the sovereign privilege of secrecy by making hidden knowledge public?” (p. 146). Dean’s answer works within the milieu of what she calls “communicative capitalism,” an environment of media ubiquity in which “subjects feel themselves to be active [blogging, posting videos on YouTube, etc.] even as their very activity reinforces the status quo. Revelation can be celebrated because it is ineffectual. Its results are medialogical, just another contribution to the circulation of content with little impact on power or policy” (p. 148). Dean is less interested in whether the 9/11 Truth Movement has something to say, and more interested in how it speaks: “The movement associated with 9/11 truth manifests a shift in conspiracy thinking, a shift from questioning to certainty and from a logic of desire to a logic of drive” (p. 148). This new form of articulation is “a new form of psychotic discourse” (p. 148). Instead of “hysterical” discourse, which features perennial questioning, the Truth Movement’s “psychotic” discourse, Dean says, is notable for its certainty about the truth, which simply requires the ability to see it. Like Birchall and Bratich, Dean has little to say about the evidence and much to say about the social milieu in which the current speculation exists. As problematic, her entire discussion frames all manner of 9/11 skepticism as “conspiracy theory,” instead of differentiating legitimate forms of skepticism. Dean’s analysis is valuable, and it is not my intention to denigrate poststructuralist epistemology — in fact, I very much identify with it — but in the case of 9/11 skepticism, as stigmatized as it is, avoiding the crucial question of whether you believe it is legitimate to question the veracity of the *9/11 Commission Report* for the more palliative question of how wild-eyed conspiracy theories are articulated invites the charge of “dodging the issue.”

Mark Fenster, in the second edition of his seminal book *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, “describes the emergence of 9/11 as an object of conspiratorial intrigue and imagination, and thus offers a snapshot of parts of an emerging set of conspiracy theories and conspiracy community as they begin to reach full bloom” (2008, p. 236). Like Melnick, Fenster declares that a lack of space confines him to “a thumbnail description of a sample of the most prominent theories and theorists” (pp. 237–238). Like Melnick and Kellner, Fenster “does not set out to debunk the 9/11 conspiracy theories” (p. 238), but instead directs the reader to an endnote that

recommends the book *Debunking 9/11 Myths* from Popular Mechanics, as well as websites such as *debunking911.com* and *911myths.com* (p. 341n15). In other words, the actual reasons Fenster believes all forms of 9/11 skepticism should be considered conspiracy theories are relegated to an endnote that presumes certain sources are always reliable on questions surrounding 9/11.<sup>2</sup> His position on 9/11 skepticism is this:

I remain skeptical of all of the conspiracy theories described in this chapter and dismissive of the most speculative. I concede, however, that the 9/11 Commission's official account fails to hold culpable individuals and institutions sufficiently responsible for their negligence on and before September 11, and its narrative and explanations (like those of any effort to explain such a complex event) must rely upon enough anomalous, ambiguous occurrences to make me understand and sympathize with those who are skeptical of the official account, even if, based on what I have read, I am not persuaded by the truth community's conclusions. (p. 238)

The endnote to this paragraph provides a lengthy discourse on Fenster's actual beliefs (p. 342n17). Among them, he sees James Ridgeway's book (2005) as the "best critique" of the *9/11 Commission Report*. He compliments Bratich's book, but acknowledges that it "eschews evaluation of the [9/11 Truth] movement's claims, as well as those of the 9/11 Commission and other state and mainstream private actors that offer the dominant explanation of the attacks" (p. 342). Fenster describes Bratich's position as an "unqualified agnosticism," and describes himself as "not as sanguine" as Bratich "that the movement's single-minded absorption with finding an elusive truth about 9/11 lends itself to political linkages with the left beyond a shared, generalized hatred of the Bush administration and a deep skepticism about the exercise of state power" (p. 342).<sup>3</sup> In

<sup>2</sup> The Popular Mechanics book, for example, received a book-length response from Professor David Ray Griffin (*Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory*). While not all of Griffin's criticisms of the Popular Mechanics book are sound, in my opinion, some of his criticisms are legitimate. In other words, it is insufficient to direct the reader to a problematic text for answers. The Popular Mechanics book is deeply flawed and often rhetorically disingenuous.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Bratich and Fenster engaged in an illuminating discussion

total, Fenster's position speaks to a common discomfort with the variety of political affiliations represented in the 9/11 Truth Movement. Most of this new chapter in the second edition of *Conspiracy Theories*, however, is devoted to a close reading of Kean and Hamilton's *Without Precedent*, which articulates the rhetorical ways in which they tried to frame the Report as comprehensive and accurate and not another Warren Commission. Fenster also spends considerable time critiquing the popular film *Loose Change*. Ultimately, Fenster's conclusion about the 9/11 Commission is deeply problematic and makes me wonder if the publication of Philip Shenon's *The Commission*, which appeared in the same year as *Conspiracy Theories*, would change his opinion?<sup>4</sup> Fenster writes: "The 9/11 Commission's *Report* and its efforts to engage and address the public, imperfect though they may have been, represent a vast improvement over the Warren Commission's efforts, and may have been as good and effective as any independent commission can be" (p. 268). This statement can too easily be read as a fatalistic apology for State malfeasance and negligence. A more diplomatic reading, however, might interpret Fenster's comment as a form of political "realism," and, indeed, many observers have declared the 9/11 Truth Movement invalid because it does not account for the complexities and inevitable incompetence of large bureaucracies. I disagree with this assessment, and what follows is a survey of what I consider to be compelling evidence for a legitimate 9/11 skepticism.

### The 9/11 Commission and Its Report

Clearly, a common opinion among cultural studies practitioners was that the *9/11 Commission Report* was not problematic enough to demand another investigation, or at least that the omissions and distortions could not possibly contain information that would dramatically transform the overarching narrative set down by the Bush Administration. Or perhaps most academics are simply unaware

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of each other's work in the *International Journal of Communication* (Vol. 3, 2009) and *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (Vol. 33 No. 3, July 2009). I recommend these dialogues to interested readers.

<sup>4</sup> Professor Fenster was given the opportunity to respond to this article publicly, but he declined.

of the continuing developments in 9/11 research. Just how compromised was the *9/11 Commission Report*? It is a question that cannot be answered adequately in this limited space; however, some omissions and anomalies can be established. At least two problematic features of the official 9/11 narrative become visible after a cursory reading of the evidence: first, the Bush Administration explicitly attempted to deny the victims' families and the American public an independent investigation of 9/11; and second, the commission that was eventually established was in no way independent of the White House, and its "inquiry" was not the form of *criminal* investigation an event such as 9/11 requires; consider, for example, that most witnesses before the Commission were not testifying under oath. In fact, the composition and execution of the 9/11 Commission ran counter to its stated mission, which was "to provide the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11" (9/11 CR, 2004, p. xvi). Its stated mission was paradoxical, because it also included the declaration not "to assign individual blame" (p. xvi); the latter declaration makes it inherently impossible to "provide the fullest possible account."

Two weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Secretary of State Colin Powell promised the administration would release a white paper outlining the evidence of Osama bin Laden's complicity in the attacks. "His guilt is going to be very obvious to the world," Powell said (quoted in "Evidence," 2001). The white paper never arrived. Five years later the FBI announced it had "no hard evidence" to connect bin Laden to the 9/11 attacks, and no indictment for the crimes of 9/11 had been issued against him (Muckraker Report, 2006). The "trail" in the hunt for bin Laden had "run cold," according to American and Pakistani officials (MSNBC, 2007), and the CIA officially closed the unit devoted to searching for bin Laden (Mazzetti, 2006). According to Richard Clarke in *Against All Enemies*, Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network were the primary suspects in the 9/11 attacks by 10 a.m. the morning of September 11, before Flight 93 had crashed, based on names from the flight manifests (Clarke, 2004, p. 13); before Flight 77 hit the Pentagon, television news was already delivering a profile of bin Laden and why he may have orchestrated the attacks.

Bin Laden's public reaction to the attacks was strange, given his repeated public vows to attack America for grievances related to its support for Israel and the presence of American troops on Muslim holy land in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden denied any role in the 9/11 attacks on three occasions, stating, "I would like to assure the world that I did not plan the recent attacks, which seems to have been

planned by people for personal reasons” (quoted in CNN, 2001). In the Pakistani paper *Ummat* he stated, “The United States should try to trace the perpetrators of these attacks within itself; the people who are a part of the U.S. system, but are dissenting against it.” He specifically identified as possible suspects “intelligence agencies in the U.S., which require billions of dollars worth of funds from the Congress and the government every year.”

On December 14, 2001, the American government released video tapes it allegedly found in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, which purport to show bin Laden confessing to the crimes of 9/11. A week later, Dr. Abdel El M. Hussein told German television, “I have carefully examined the Pentagon’s translation. This translation is very problematic. At the most important places where it is held to prove the guilt of bin Laden, it is not identical with the Arabic” (quoted in DC Indymedia, 2001). Dr. Gernot Rotter, professor of Islamic and Arabic Studies at the Asia-Africa Institute at the University of Hamburg, added: “The American translators who listened to the tapes and transcribed them apparently wrote a lot of things in that they wanted to hear but that cannot be heard on the tape no matter how many times you listen to it.” Professor Bruce Lawrence, head of Duke University’s Religious Studies program and editor of *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, called the tapes “bogus” (quoted in Barrett, 2007). Veteran journalist Eric Margolis (2010), who met bin Laden in Afghanistan before 9/11, called the tapes “clumsy fakes” and “told CNN viewers [bin Laden] was not the man in the tapes.” Of course the tapes may be authentic, but questions remain: Why would a world-famous terrorist with a declared vendetta against the United States publicly declare his innocence in the most devastating terrorist attack on American soil, if he alone actually orchestrated this terrorist masterstroke? Can the US government provide proof of the provenance and chain of custody of the confession video? So far it has not.

According to the *Washington Post*, in 2010 a former CIA official revealed that the agency’s Iraq Operation’s Group had actually created “a video purporting to show Osama bin Laden and his cronies sitting around a campfire swigging bottles of liquor and savoring their conquests with boys,” part of an effort to portray bin Laden as a pedophile. “The actors were drawn from ‘some of us darker-skinned employees,’” a CIA employee said (quoted in Stein, 2010). This revelation of a fake bin Laden tape, in addition to a long history of US intelligence complex duplicity, reinforces the plausibility of

suspicion that the bin Laden video in which he discusses 9/11 could be a fake.

For many Americans the confession tape was all the evidence they would need to connect bin Laden to 9/11, but the victims' families fought for over a year to have an independent investigation. Perhaps one of the most incredible facts about the post-9/11 era is that the sitting president during the worst terror attacks in the country's history actually fought the families of the victims not to investigate the attacks with an independent commission. On January 24, 2002, Congressional and White House sources told CNN that "President Bush personally asked Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle . . . to limit the congressional investigation into the events of September 11" (Bash, Karl, and King, 2002). On May 23, 2002, the President publicly announced his opposition to the formation of an independent commission (CBS News, 2002). The White House then stalled the creation of an independent commission, only relenting 441 days after 9/11. Senator Daschle had heard from Senator Trent Lott that the efforts to block the 9/11 Commission legislation were orchestrated by top Bush aide Karl Rove (Shenon, 2008, p. 29); in conflict with his commitment to the 9/11 Commission, executive director Philip Zelikow maintained contact with Rove while the commission was in progress (p. 173). Commissioner John Lehman said Rove was "very much involved" with the commission, and was "the quarterback for dealing with the commission" (pp. 175-176).

On November 27, 2002, President Bush signed the 9/11 Commission Bill into law, and nominated Henry Kissinger as the commission's chairman. Considered by some to be a war criminal, Kissinger's nomination was an exceedingly cynical gesture from the White House. Kissinger was a frequent adviser to Bush and Cheney, an insider with an extensive history of secrecy and cover-ups. He soon resigned, along with vice chairman George Mitchell, due to "conflicts of interest." Their replacements also had conflicts of interest, but none resigned from the commission because of them. Some commissioners worked for law firms that represented the airlines impacted on 9/11, several commissioners had strong ties to defense contractors and financial consulting firms, and others had legally represented the upper echelons of the Democratic and Republican parties (Arnold, 2003).

Chair Thomas Kean had a significant connection to a Saudi oil company, and vice chair Lee Hamilton "failed to show the virtues of independence and thoroughness both as chair of the Select Com-

mittee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran in 1987, and again in 1992 as chair of the congressional task force charged with investigation of the 'October Surprise' allegations against the Reagan-Bush campaign in 1980" (Sacks, 2006, p. 233). Hamilton's record in such investigations shows a willingness to deflect potentially damaging examinations of the Bush family. Hamilton, though a Democratic Party member, had lengthy friendships with top neo-conservatives in the Bush Administration, including Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld, who "let others in the White House know that Hamilton could be trusted" (Shenon, 2008, p. 177).

Cheney and Hamilton formed a close bond when Hamilton led the House investigation of Iran-Contra after the arms-for-hostages affair was exposed. Cheney was the ranking Republican. Hamilton had known Rumsfeld even longer. Rumsfeld served in the House from neighboring Illinois from 1962 to 1969. . . . They were still close friends when Cheney and Rumsfeld returned to power in Washington in 2001. . . . Hamilton also had a good relationship with Cheney's powerful White House counsel, David Addington, who had worked for Cheney in Congress. (p. 33)

Philip Zelikow, the commission's executive director, also "had good friends on Rumsfeld's staff, most importantly Steven Cambone, the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, [who] was Rumsfeld's most trusted aide" (p. 205). Even Henry Kissinger, the deposed chair of the 9/11 Commission, had representation on the commission in the form of John Lehman, who served under Kissinger at the National Security Council, and who was a member of the neoconservative think tank, the Project for the New American Century, along with Cheney, Rumsfeld, Cambone, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and several others in the Bush Administration. Thus, the upper echelon of neoconservative advisers in the Bush administration was deeply entwined with members of the 9/11 Commission.

The connection between the Commission and the neocons appears to be more than superficial, when one considers the final text. For example, Paul Wolfowitz recalled in an April 2004 speech at the Aspen Institute how he and Donald Rumsfeld instructed the 9/11 Commission to frame its report in the neoconservative rhetoric of the "existential threat":

When Don Rumsfeld and I had lunch with members of the 9/11 commission recently, one member asked what could they do to ensure that their report would make a real difference, that it would be read five or ten years from now, instead of just filed away on a dusty shelf. . . . What I told them, basically, was to write something similar to George Kennan's long telegram or Paul Nitze's NSC-68. . . . [NSC-68] is a *model of long-term strategic planning*. NSC-68 addressed not only importance of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union, but also the importance of the ideological orientation of the Soviet Union. Paul recognized the Soviet ideology as an *inherent evil*. And when combined with a formidable military capability, that ideology became an *existential threat*. (Wolfowitz, 2004; italics mine)

The Commission presents al-Qaeda in precisely these exaggerated and Manichean terms, while repeatedly and misleadingly describing al-Qaeda as a "worldwide organization" (911CR, 2004, p. 55), "a hierarchical top-down group with defined positions, tasks, and salaries" (p. 67).<sup>5</sup> President Bush and Vice President Cheney, when pressed to talk to the 9/11 Commission, would eventually do so, but not under oath, only if they could be interviewed together, only with specific members of the commission, and under the condition that no notes would be taken during the session. When Senator Max Cleland left the commission to take a job in the private sector, he called the commission "a national scandal" (quoted in Boehlert, 2003).

The scandal did not end with the belated start, the selection of commissioners, or the limited allotment of funds (initially \$3 mil-

<sup>5</sup> Several (unlikely) sources reject this depiction of al-Qaeda. For example, former CIA executive director "Buzzy" Krongard rejects the notion of a "top-down" organization: "Al-Qaida, in my opinion, is an amalgamation, a loose amalgamation of people who share an antipathy to the United States and all Western values. Some of them hate each other, some of them get along, some of them are very, very small splinter groups, but it's not like IBM, with an organizational chart with black lines and chains of command and things like that" (quoted in Koppelman, 2007). According to Professor Andrew Silke, Director of Terrorism Studies at the University of East London, al-Qaeda "does not have a clear hierarchy, military mindset and centralized command. At best, al-Qaeda is a network of affiliated groups sharing religious and ideological backgrounds, but which often interact sparingly" (Silke, 2003). And the RAND corporation, the psychotic mind of the US military-industrial complex, refers to al-Qaeda as a "contested concept" (Rabasa et. al., 2006, p. 26). The definition of al-Qaeda is also complicated by its history of support from Western intelligence agencies (Curtis, 2010; Dreyfus, 2005; Labévière, 2000).

lion, and reluctantly increased to \$12 million two months later; by comparison, over \$60 million was spent trying to impeach President Clinton). By the admission of Kean and Hamilton, the 9/11 Commission was “set up to fail” (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 14). Of course, they believe the Commission was eventually a success, despite considerable obfuscation from the White House and the Republican House of Representatives in an election year. The appointment of executive director Philip Zelikow was an insurmountable conflict of interest. The “importance” of the executive director position, say Kean and Hamilton, “cannot be overstated” (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 22). Zelikow selected staff, and had considerable control over the final edit of the report. According to Paul Sperry, “Though he has no vote, (Zelikow) arguably has more sway than any member, including the chairman. Zelikow picks the areas of investigation, the briefing materials, the topics for hearings, the witnesses, and the lines of questioning for witnesses. . . . In effect, he sets the agenda and runs the investigation” (quoted in Sacks, 2005). Kean and Hamilton state they “seriously only considered one candidate,” who was recommended by the White House. In fact, “Zelikow was selected with little consultation with the rest of the committee, but several commissioners had concerns about the kind of inquiry he would lead” (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 35).

Zelikow’s profile alarmed the Family Steering Committee so much that they requested he resign. In addition to being a professor of history at Harvard and the University of Virginia, Zelikow co-authored a book with Condoleezza Rice, and was later appointed as a senior policy advisor to Rice at the US Department of State; he served in the US Department of State under the second Reagan administration, and joined the National Security Council under President George H.W. Bush; he co-authored the 2002 National Security Strategy for President George W. Bush, for whom he was also a member of the transition team following the 2000 election; he was a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 2001 to 2003; and Zelikow was a member of the Carter-Ford Commission on Federal Electoral Reform, members of which described him as “arrogant and secretive” (Shenon, 2008, p. 59). Even Henry Kissinger knew Zelikow from his work at the University of Virginia and Harvard (p. 61). Bryan Sacks also notes an often-obscured item on Zelikow’s resume: his directorship of the Aspen Strategy Group (ASG) in the 1990s. Emeritus members of the ASG include Rice, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage, I. Lewis ‘Scooter’ Libby, and former *New York Times* re-

porter Judith Miller (Sacks, 2005). Zelikow neglected to mention several compromising experiences on the resume he gave Kean and Hamilton: his role on the Bush 2000 transition team; his part in the review and eventual demotion of counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke; and his authorship of the Bush pre-emptive war doctrine in 2002 (Shenon, 2008, p. 170). With Zelikow as the executive director of the 9/11 Commission, the White House and the national security complex were investigating themselves. As Richard Clarke said on the appointment of Zelikow, “The fix is in” (quoted in Shenon, 2008, p. 63).

Most of the commission staff, recruited by Zelikow, were chosen because they had high-level security clearances, which would enable access to essential documents and thereby quicken the investigation. According to Ernest May — a professor of American History at Harvard, occasional consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, and other agencies, and a senior advisor to the 9/11 Commission — once a premium was placed on security clearance, there was a preference for “people who could be detailed from national security agencies or who had been on the staff of one of the congressional intelligence oversight committees. Of the fifty-odd men and women who counted as professional rather than administrative staff, at least half had such backgrounds” (May, 2005). All of the commission employees had to be cleared by the FBI and CIA to handle secret information (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 34). This preference for staff from intelligence agencies, framed by Kean and Hamilton as a vital component of an expedient investigation, ensured nothing incriminating of these agencies would appear in the report. The “bipartisan” composition of the Commission — with equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans — ensured nothing terribly damaging to members of either party would be included in the report. Information that required the highest security clearances was meted out by the White House only to select members of the commission. Kean and Hamilton explain: “The White House wanted strict limitations on both of these fronts — limiting staff with access to White House documents to just two or three people, limiting the commissioners with access to certain materials to just the chair and vice-chair, and restricting the amount of notes the staff could bring back to the 9/11 Commission’s office” (p. 72).

For example, after a battle over access to several years of Presidential Daily Briefings (PDB), the White House agreed to release only those PDBs pertaining to select topics, and that larger pool of PDBs

would be seen only by commissioner Jamie Gorelick and Zelikow, and they would decide which PDBs to show other commissioners (p. 98). Ultimately, all of the information contained in the report had to be cleared by the White House (p. 134). And should something contentious escape the initial filters of agency and party affiliation, and White House regulations, Zelikow was the final arbiter of what was included in the report. As May wrote, “no language appeared anywhere in the final text unless Zelikow or I or both of us – and all the commissioners – had accepted it” (May, 2005). With so many layers of implicit censorship of information regarding intelligence agencies, political parties, corporate interests, and the White House itself, there was no need for an explicit cover-up. The commission was structurally incapable of being seriously critical of the government or the national security complex. As 9/11 widow Lori van Auken remarked during the commission hearings, “We [the Family Steering Committee] feel that the Commission already has its report written. It’s our sense today that they decided early on what they wanted the public to know, and then geared the hearings to fit this pre-conceived script” (quoted in Lance, 2004, p. 3).

In May’s account of the Commission’s work, he offers some euphemistic criticism of how the composition of the Commission inflected the final report: “Most troubling to me,” he writes, “the report is probably too balanced. Its harshest criticism is directed at institutions and procedures, particularly the CIA, the FBI, and communications links within the counterterrorist community. But many of the staff had worked in these or other national security agencies. They felt loyal to them and some of them expected to return to work there. Collective drafting led to the introduction of passages that offset criticism of an agency with words of praise. Not all these words were deserved” (May, 2005). May’s criticism of the report’s treatment of the intelligence agencies is unquestionably understated because, even after what was allegedly the worst intelligence failure in American history, no one within the intelligence community was fired or demoted as a result of demonstrable failures pertaining to 9/11; in fact, principal players were actually rewarded. George Tenet, the Director of Central Intelligence for the CIA on 9/11, was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Bush in 2004. In August 2011, former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke accused Tenet, Cofer Black, and Richard Blee of the CIA of “knowingly withholding intelligence from the Bush and Clinton White House, the FBI, Immigration and the State and Defense Departments about two of

the 9/11 hijackers who had entered the United States more than a year before the attacks” (Leopold, 2011). Porter Goss — a former clandestine CIA operative and chair of the House Intelligence Committee who co-sponsored the USA PATRIOT Act and co-chaired the Joint 9/11 Intelligence Inquiry — had breakfast on 9/11 with Senator Bob Graham and Pakistani ISI Director Lt. Gen. Mahmood Ahmed. At this meeting, the three were allegedly discussing terrorism from Afghanistan, and Osama bin Laden in particular (Risen, 2002). Gen. Ahmed was identified by an October 2001 *Times of India* report as the individual who authorized British-born terrorist Ahmad Saeed Omar Sheikh to wire transfer \$100,000 to hijacker Mohammed Atta. The FBI would only confirm that it “traced the origin of the funding for 9/11 back to financial accounts in Pakistan” (Joshi, 2003). Gen. Ahmed resigned shortly after the *Times of India* story appeared. The *9/11 Commission Report* described the origins of the financing for the 9/11 attacks as “of little practical significance” (911CR, 2004, p. 172). Porter Goss was named Director of the CIA in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The reported machinations of intelligence agencies before, during, and after 9/11 provide compelling but incomplete glimpses of possible foreknowledge of or participation in the attacks by thus far unindicted nations or factions. According to the *9/11 Commission Report* (2004), President Bush received more than 40 “intelligence articles in the PDBs [Presidential Daily Briefings] from January 20 to September 10, 2001, that related to Bin Ladin” (p. 254), including the infamous August 6, 2001 PDB titled “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US” (p. 261). Several countries offered warnings of forthcoming attacks against the United States, prior to 9/11 (see the following summary: <http://www.historycommons.org/essay.jsp?article=essaytheytriedtowarnus>). As noted at the aforementioned website, “So many countries warned the US: Afghanistan, Argentina, Britain, Cayman Islands, Egypt, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, and Russia. Yet the two countries in the best position to know about the 9/11 plot — Saudi Arabia and Pakistan — apparently didn’t give any warning at all.” The intelligence agents of at least three of America’s allies — Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Israel — demonstrated suspicious behaviour before and on 9/11. For example, 28 pages from a congressional intelligence report on 9/11 were redacted because they allegedly detailed connections between the Saudi government and the hijackers (Johnston, 2003). 15 of the 19 hijackers, and of course Osama bin Laden, possessed Saudi passports. The transfer of funds between the Saudi Ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar bin Sultan (known as “Bandar Bush,” because of his close ties to the Bush family), and his wife and at least two of the hijackers over a period of several months was the subject of much interest during the 9/11 investigation. Prince Bandar would later claim that Saudi intelligence was “actively following” the future hijackers (CNN, “Ex-Saudi ambassador,” 2007). Perhaps he was referring to Saudi spy Omar al-Bayoumi, who befriended two of the West Coast hijackers he accidentally met at a restaurant (911CR, 2004, p. 217)? Pakistani intelligence, the ISI, was also implicated. Given that Omar Saeed Sheikh was reportedly a “protected asset” of the ISI, argues author Mark Curtis, “it is barely credible that the ISI did not have foreknowledge of 9/11” (Curtis,

FBI agents who obstructed the investigation of alleged al-Qaeda activities were also promoted in the wake of 9/11. Marion Bowman, the FBI's National Security Law Unit deputy general counsel,

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2010, p. 252). In addition to the story of Gen. Mahmoud Ahmed and Omar Saeed Sheikh mentioned above, the former security chief for Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto acted as Osama bin Laden's "handling officer" for the ISI (Raman, 2007). The ISI has a lengthy association with the CIA, and was part of a collaboration of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan sending jihadists to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s (Dreyfuss, 2005, p. 273).

During the same period that the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan collaborated to fight the Soviets, Israel sold arms to Iran (the "Iran-Contra" affair). Israel was also, like the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, involved in supporting fundamentalist Islam; for example, "beginning in 1967 through the late 1980s, Israel helped the Muslim Brotherhood establish itself in the occupied territories. It assisted Ahmed Yassin, the leader of the Brotherhood, in creating Hamas, betting that its Islamic character would weaken the PLO" (Dreyfuss, 2005, p. 191). Agents of Israel were also reported committing suspicious activities on 9/11. The suspicion surrounding these activities is confusing, since in the weeks prior to 9/11 Israel reportedly issued two warnings to the US government about impending attacks. Nonetheless, Israeli agents were reported conducting bizarre behaviour on 9/11. For example, about two hours before the attack, two employees of Odigo, Inc., an Israeli company with its headquarters two blocks from the World Trade Center, received warning of the impending attacks ("Instant messages," 2001). The FBI reportedly investigated the matter, but no results of the investigation have been disclosed. After the first plane struck WTC1, a woman in New Jersey witnessed several men on top of a warehouse celebrating and taking pictures of themselves in front of the burning tower. The men, five in total, were later arrested and their photos confiscated. Their photos included a picture of one of the men holding a lighter aloft in front of the burning tower. At least two of the men were later identified as Israeli spies. After being deported, they appeared on Israeli television and proclaimed, "Our purpose was to document the event" (Ketcham, 2007). A few days after 9/11 the owner of the company where the Israeli spies worked, Urban Moving Systems, fled the country. The spies were definitely part of an intelligence gathering operation; however, no evidence of their involvement in the 9/11 plot has been discovered. Skeptics often note the fact that many members of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) think tank, a group committed to a vision of a new Pax Americana in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, had deep ties to right-wing politics in Israel. All of this evidence sounds compelling, but none of it establishes definitive proof of Israeli involvement with 9/11. At best, skeptics can say there is contentious evidence suggesting potential foreknowledge of or involvement in the 9/11 plot by members of Pakistani, Saudi, and Israeli intelligence. However, it must be stressed that no proof of direct involvement exists. In addition, to single out one of these countries as a *likely* culprit is foolish since suspicious evidence seemingly implicating all of them in 9/11 exists. Suspicion of Israel has garnered the most attention from critics of 9/11 conspiracy theories, often leading to accusations of anti-Semitism; the Anti-Defamation League issued two rebuttals to the incriminations of Israel (ADL 2003, 2006). The fundamental problem for researchers, however, is the opacity of intelligence agencies in every country. We may never know the whole story of 9/11 simply because of the role secrecy plays in the operation of the State.

had refused a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrant for the Zacharias Moussaoui investigation. The 9/11 Congressional Inquiry accused Bowman's unit of giving Minneapolis FBI agents "inexcusably confused and inaccurate information" that was "patently false" (Grow, 2002). In January 2003, Bowman was awarded a presidential citation and a raise. Dave Frasca, head of the FBI's Radical Fundamentalist Unit, was also accused of obstructing investigations that might have uncovered the 9/11 plot. Frasca suppressed the infamous "Phoenix memo," a letter from Phoenix office FBI agent Kenneth Williams on July 10, 2001 that warned of supporters of bin Laden attending American flight schools. Frasca was promoted not long after 9/11. A total of 13 veteran national security experts turned whistleblowers in the wake of 9/11, including Sibel Edmonds,<sup>7</sup> Robert Wright, and Coleen Rowley (one of TIME magazine's Persons of the Year for 2002), after their testimony was ignored by the 9/11 Commission.

Perhaps May would also describe the Commission's treatment of the FAA and NORAD as "too balanced"? Kean and Hamilton reveal that the commission considered legal action against the FAA and NORAD, when it was apparent senior officials "made statements about the timeline of 9/11 that were later proven to be inaccurate" (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 127). Currently, at least three contradictory timelines for FAA and NORAD responses on 9/11 exist. "Fog of war could explain why some people were confused on the day of 9/11," argue Kean and Hamilton (2006), "but it could not explain why all of the after-action reports, accident investigations, and public testimony by FAA and NORAD officials advanced an account of 9/11 that was untrue" (p. 261).

Essential information contained in the *9/11 Commission Report*, information that establishes a connection between Osama bin Laden and 9/11, is derived from reports of alleged interrogations of al-Qaeda detainees by US intelligence. The commissioners never met the detainees, were not allowed to submit questions to the interrogators, and could not corroborate some of the evidence attributed to detainee confessions (9/11 CR, 2004, p. 146). Kean and Hamilton admit where

<sup>7</sup> Edmonds is now the most gagged person in American history. She has stated concerning the evidence she is forbidden to discuss, "But I can tell that once, and if, and when this issue gets to be, under real terms, investigated, you will be seeing certain people that we know from this country standing trial; and they will be prosecuted criminally." A blogger named Luke Ryland has provided the best coverage of Edmonds' case: <http://letsibeledmondsspeak.blogspot.com>.

they could not corroborate information, “it was left to the reader to consider the credibility of the source — we had no opportunity to do so” (Kean and Hamilton, 2006, p. 124). May says the Commission “never had full confidence in the interrogation reports as historical sources” (May, 2005). According to a document discovered by the ACLU in 2010, Cheney’s counsel David Addington, Attorney General John Ashcroft, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and CIA Director George Tenet had warned the Commission in January 2004 that its request to question al-Qaeda detainees was a “line” it “should not cross” (quoted in Kapur, 2010).

In 2008 the CIA revealed that it had tortured three al-Qaeda detainees including alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), which further obscures the veracity of comments attributed to these suspects (BBC News, 2008). KSM was allegedly waterboarded 183 times in one month (Shane, 2009), and the CIA threatened to rape his mother and kill his children (Landers, 2009). Transcripts of KSM’s interrogations released in June 2009 noted KSM admitting he “[made] up stories” when tortured by his captors (Barrett, 2009). The CIA admitted it destroyed at least two videotapes of al-Qaeda detainee interrogations, a clear case of obstruction of the 9/11 Commission (Mazzetti, 2007). MSNBC conducted an investigation and found that more than 25% of the footnotes in the *9/11 Commission Report* were sourced to tortured testimony (Windrem and Limjoco, 2008); significantly, most of these footnotes refer to chapters 5 and 7, which contain the allegations against bin Laden and details of the al-Qaeda plot.

When KSM allegedly confessed to orchestrating 9/11 and 30 other terror plots before a military tribunal in March 2007, no reporters or lawyers were allowed at the hearing. President Bush signed into law the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which allows the President to suspend *habeas corpus* in the detention of an “enemy combatant,” and it allows for tortured testimony and hearsay to be admitted as evidence in a tribunal. The unconstitutional nature of the Act has already cast doubt on KSM’s tribunal, among others. For example, former CIA officer Robert Baer wrote in *TIME* magazine,

On the face of it, KSM, as he is known inside the government, comes across as boasting, at times mentally unstable. It’s also clear he is making things up. I’m told by people involved in the investigation that KSM was present during *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Danny Pearl’s execution but was in fact not the

person who killed him. There exists videotape footage of the execution that minimizes KSM's role. And if KSM did indeed exaggerate his role in the Pearl murder, it raises the question of just what else he has exaggerated, or outright fabricated. Just as importantly, there is an absence of collateral evidence that would support KSM's story. (Baer, 2007)

Even murdered journalist Daniel Pearl's family does not believe KSM's confession (Ross, 2007). The skepticism was widespread, and sometimes questioned the style as well as the content of the confessions: for example, while the redacted confessions are rambling and incoherent, a mess of broken English, a 2003 article from *The Guardian* says KSM "spoke very good English" (Gunaratna, 2003).

What if KSM turns out to have the same credibility as a source as once highly-regarded detainee Abu Zubaydah? Zubaydah was touted by the Bush Administration as a "high-value" detainee, a "number 2 or 3" person in al-Qaeda, a confidant of Osama bin Laden, and even as one who planned 9/11. In 2010, the US Justice Department backed away from all of these claims (Leopold, 2010). Zubaydah, like KSM, was tortured repeatedly. The videos of his torture sessions were among those destroyed by the CIA. What the 9/11 Commission used as primary sources for the most important chapters of its report were, in other words, allegations from deep within the secretive and unethical void of the national security state based on statements that may have been made by a man who was tortured 183 times in one month, and another man who was initially touted as a member of the al-Qaeda management team but later discarded as a nobody with no connection to the planning of 9/11. In April 2011 the Obama Administration announced a military tribunal, instead of a civilian court, would try KSM. The credibility of the primary source in the 9/11 case will likely remain in dispute and beyond transparent investigation.

### 9/11 Skepticism and American Popular Culture

There are several examples of 9/11 skepticism in American popular culture of the past ten years. For example, in the 2006 version of *Casino Royale*, James Bond encounters terrorists who use the financial markets to profit from their terrorism. A banker named Le Chiffre short-sells companies against whom he later orchestrates terrorist attacks, a plot element that clearly echoes the suspicious

put-options trading on the airlines affected by the 9/11 attacks. Allegations of “insider trading” on the 9/11 attacks were dismissed as conspiracy theories, and the 9/11 Commission would eventually declare, after an SEC investigation, “that the apparently suspicious [trades prior to 9/11] consistently proved innocuous” (9/11CR, 2004, p. 499n130). However, market insiders just after 9/11, and multiple academics who studied the data years later, determined the suspicious trading had to be the result of insider foreknowledge of the attacks. While the Commission attributed most of the trading to “a single U.S.-based institutional investor with no conceivable ties to al Qaeda,” it did not name this investor, nor did it explain why someone with foreknowledge of the attacks had to be tied to al-Qaeda. Forewarnings of the attacks were so common in the months leading up to September 2001 — for example, the Report says “there were more than 40 intelligence articles in the PDBs [Presidential Daily Briefings] from January 20 to September 10, 2001, that related to Bin Ladin” (9/11 CR, 2004, p. 254) — that chapter 8 of the Report is titled with George Tenet’s famous remark that “the system was blinking red.” Several foreign intelligence agencies had sent warnings to US intelligence prior to 9/11. Other forms of potential foreknowledge have been debated by skeptics, but here I will focus on the possibility that “insider trading” capitalized on foreknowledge of the attacks. The purpose of this brief detour is to demonstrate that there are cases of skepticism pertaining to 9/11, such as the suspicion of pre-9/11 insider trading, that are supported by substantial and credible evidence, and clearly do not deserve to be classified as fringe-dwelling conspiracy theories.

Several countries, including Belgium, Britain, Canada, Cyprus, France, Italy, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Monte Carlo, launched investigations into suspicious stock market trading immediately prior to 9/11. Extremely unusual volumes of put options were purchased, betting on the decline of the stocks associated with the two airlines affected on 9/11, United Airlines and American Airlines; for example, CBS News reported “a jump in UAL put options 90 times above normal between September 6 and September 10, and 285 times higher than average on the Thursday before the attack . . . [as well as] a jump in American Airlines put options 60 times above normal on the day before the attacks” (quoted in Zarembka, 2008, p. 65). In addition, high volumes of trading on firms located in the World Trade Center towers were observed. In Germany, central bank president Ernst Welteke reported that a study conducted by his bank

showed that “there are ever clearer signs that there were activities on international financial markets that must have been carried out with the necessary expert knowledge.” The study cites “almost irrefutable proof of insider trading” (Brinkley-Rogers, Chardy, and Olkon, 2001). “I saw put-call numbers higher than I’ve ever seen in 10 years of following the markets, particularly the options markets,” John Kinnucan, a principal of Broadband Research, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Berthelsen, 2001). Even more experts in the financial markets expressed the opinion that millions, perhaps billions, had been stolen based on foreknowledge of the attacks:

According to Phil Erlanger, a former Senior Technical Analyst with Fidelity, and founder of a Florida firm that tracks short selling and options trading, insiders made off with billions (not mere millions) in profits by betting on the fall of stocks they knew would tumble in the aftermath of the WTC and Pentagon attacks. Andreas von Bulow, a former member of the German Parliament, once responsible for the oversight of the German secret services, estimated that profits by insider traders were \$15 billion . . . Jonathan Winer, an ABC News Consultant, said ‘it’s absolutely unprecedented to see cases of insider trading covering the entire world from Japan to the US to North America to Europe.’ (quoted in Zarembka, 2008, p. 64)

In addition to the many international bankers who believed the put options trading prior to 9/11 was obviously a case of insider trading, professor of finance Allen Poteshman studied the evidence and reached a similar conclusion in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Business*: “the paper concludes that there is evidence of unusual option market activity in the days leading up to September 11 that is consistent with investors trading on advance knowledge of the attacks” (Poteshman, 2006, p. 1725). Other academic studies followed. An April 2010 study published by academics from the University of Wisconsin, Hong Kong Baptist University, and the National University of Singapore concluded that “abnormal trading” prior to the 9/11 attacks was “consistent with insiders anticipating the 9–11 attacks” (Wong, Thompson, and Teh, 2010). Another study published in April 2010 by academics from the University of Zurich confirmed the results of Poteshman’s study (Chesney et al., 2010, p. 18). In addition to these studies of pre-9/11 trading, members of the German data recovery company, CONVAR, hired to recover hard drive data from

computers destroyed in the World Trade Center towers speculated to Reuters that illegal market trades were made prior to and during the attacks:

Richard Wagner, a data retrieval expert at the company, said illegal transfers of more than \$100 million might have been made immediately before and during the disaster.

“There is a suspicion that some people had advance knowledge of the approximate time of the plane crashes in order to move out amounts exceeding \$100 million,” Wagner said. “They thought that the records of their transactions could not be traced after the main frames were destroyed.” (quoted in Fury, 2008)

CONVAR reportedly cooperated with an FBI investigation into the recovered hard drives; however, since 2001 there has been no reporting on the progress of this investigation.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) would eventually conclude all of the evidence of insider trading had an “innocuous explanation” (9/11 CR, 2004, p. 499n130). According to the Report, “much of the seemingly suspicious trading in American [Airlines] on September 10 was traced to a specific U.S.-based options trading newsletter, faxed to its subscribers on Sunday, September 9, which recommended these trades” (p. 499n130). Economics professor Paul Zarembka (2008) refutes the “newsletter” explanation for the anomalies observed: “considering the vast numbers of newsletters being put out, it is hardly a surprise to find one which made such a recommendation. The issue is whether this recommendation was unusual, whether opposite recommendations were or were not being made, and whether *these* subscribers were in fact heavily involved in AMR option trading on 9–10–01” (p. 67; emphasis in original). The newsletter referenced by the SEC was issued by Glenn Engel of Goldman Sachs. In April 2010, the SEC finally issued its entire report on the matter of insider trading prior to 9/11.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, “interviews with the financial advisers and traders who initiated those [suspicious] transactions found they based their decisions on several bearish factors already affecting the airline industry, including widely distributed recommendations for short selling from a California newsletter called Options Hotline” (Schuman, 2010). In other

<sup>8</sup> <http://nsarchive.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/9-11-sec-report.pdf>

words, the traders interviewed by the SEC said they did not act on insider knowledge. Unfortunately, as discovered by a 2009 FOIA request submitted by David Callahan of SmartCEO, SEC records related to potential insider trading have since “been destroyed.”<sup>9</sup>

Other examples of 9/11 skepticism in American popular culture include: the film *V for Vendetta* (2006), about a government that sets a plague on its own people in order to consolidate its power, possessed so many analogies with the narratives of the 9/11 Truth Movement that a YouTube user named “Drural” edited a compilation of scenes from the film demonstrating its allusions to 9/11 skepticism;<sup>10</sup> the TV show *Jericho* (2006–2008), about Americans dealing with the aftermath of a nuclear attack apparently sponsored by a faction within the US government, portrayed a fictionalized account of “continuity of government” contingencies that were declared on 9/11 and never rescinded;<sup>11</sup> the first season of the TV show *Heroes* (2006–2010) featured a collection of superheroes trying to prevent a massive explosion from going off in New York City, an event, we are told by a powerful businessman played by Malcolm McDowell, that will be used to rally support for a specific political candidate; season 5 of the TV show *24* (2001–2010) featured a president who plots a terrorist attack on his own country; and *Rescue Me* (2004–2011), a show about NYC firefighters living in the aftermath of 9/11, features actor and 9/11 activist Daniel Sanjata, who plays a firefighter who is skeptical of the official 9/11 narrative. These examples of popular culture engaging the possibility of a government committing terrorism against its own people, in the aftermath of 9/11 and with the specific allusions they present, suggest the discussion of 9/11 skepticism, though apparently too controversial for academics to address, found a willing audience among producers and consumers of popular film and television. No doubt, many viewers were aware of the allusions based on the circulation online of 9/11 skepticism, and

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<sup>9</sup> <http://maxkeiser.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/FOIAresponseGIF1.gif>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lkKyaj1GF4>

<sup>11</sup> President Bush declared a “state of emergency” on 9/11 that invoked “continuity of government” policies developed by neoconservatives such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld at least since the Reagan Administration. The “state of emergency,” which essentially suspends the US constitution and activates hundreds of previously dormant laws, has been renewed every year since 2001, including by President Obama in 2010. Professor Peter Dale Scott discusses “continuity of government” measures and 9/11 in his 2007 book *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America*, pp. 180–245.

probably many viewers saw these plots as echoes of “9/11 conspiracy theories.” The difference between these examples of popular culture appropriation and the academic treatises on 9/11 in American culture is that these films and TV shows at least contained consideration of the ideas in circulation online, whereas mainstream academics seemed to believe 9/11 skepticism was either marginal enough to ignore or unconvincing in the forms it has appeared (for example, Griffin 2007, 2008, 2010). While I do not agree with most publications of the 9/11 Truth Movement *in their entirety*, I believe academia should be the place where individual claims are taken up, discussed, researched, and evaluated.

Popular culture also reflected the trauma, paranoia, and fear generated by events related to 9/11, events in its immediate aftermath. In particular, several television shows and films in the post-9/11 era used bioterrorism as a key plot point in the wake of the anthrax attacks that came to be known as Amerithrax. Television shows such as *24*, *Watch Over Me*, and *ReGenesis*, and films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *Resident Evil* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2006), and *Pandemic* (2007), featured bioterrorism as central narrative devices. The Amerithrax attacks began on September 18, 2001, and continued for several weeks. Targets of anthrax-laced letters included NBC, the New York Post, and Senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy, early opponents of the proposed USA PATRIOT Act. Initial news reports connected the attacks to al-Qaeda and Iraq. According to a *Daily News* report, “In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 anthrax attacks, White House officials repeatedly pressed FBI Director Robert Mueller to prove it was a second-wave assault by Al Qaeda” (Meek, 2008). Even though these foreign connections were discounted, as late as February 5, 2003 Secretary of State Colin Powell stated before the United Nations:

Less than a teaspoon-full of dry anthrax in an envelope shut down the United States Senate in the fall of 2001. This forced several hundred people to undergo emergency medical treatment and killed two postal workers just from an amount just about this quantity that was inside of an envelope. Saddam Hussein could have produced 25,000 liters. If concentrated into this dry form, this amount would be enough to fill tens upon tens of thousands of teaspoons.

Six weeks later, the invasion of Iraq began. That is, the Amerithrax attacks were used to connect 9/11 with the initiative to invade Iraq. Forensic evidence led FBI investigators to suspects at the biodefense labs in Fort Detrick, Maryland. After wrongfully targeting a virologist named Steven Hatfill, the FBI identified Dr. Bruce Ivins, a researcher at Fort Detrick, as its primary suspect. After being harassed by the FBI, Ivins allegedly committed suicide in 2008. The FBI declared the case closed. However, the case against Ivins was so spotty that establishment media such as *The Wall Street Journal* declared “Bruce Ivins Wasn’t the Anthrax Culprit” (Spertzel, 2008) and “The Anthrax Attacks Remain Unsolved” (Epstein, 2010). Senator Leahy expressed “extreme doubts” about the case (Kane, 2011). A scientific review of the evidence by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) concluded, “[i]t is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion about the origins of the B. anthracis in the mailings based on the available scientific evidence alone” (quoted in Sheridan, 2011). Anthrax found in a flask in Ivins’ lab “shared genetic similarities with spores in the mailed letters,” but the NAS study concludes this flask “was not the immediate source of spores used in the letters” (Sheridan, 2011). Dr. Henry S. Heine, a scientist at Fort Detrick, said it would have been “impossible” for Ivins to grow the necessary 10 trillion spores without anyone noticing, a task that would have required 8,000 lab hours more than Ivins actually logged in the months preceding the attacks (Matsumoto, 2010). McClatchy journalist Greg Gordon (2011) and *Wired* magazine writer Noah Shachtman (2011a, 2011b) have also recently explored the holes in the case against Ivins.

### Academic 9/11 Skepticism

The common refrain among progressives and radicals was that the *9/11 Commission Report* contained serious omissions and distortions, but none serious enough to warrant further investigation or to consider the remote possibility that a faction of the US federal government or military, or of a foreign government, enabled or orchestrated the attacks. This position is paradoxical: How can one know the omissions are unimportant? And if this event is the pivot on which pre-emptive wars, widespread torture, transgression of the US constitution, and the perpetuation of generational conflict turn, then how can the deficiencies of the report not be considered

consequential enough for further review? The Commission's entire mandate, in fact, was paradoxical: at once "to provide the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11," and yet *not* "to assign individual blame." Ultimately, the report blamed "deep institutional failings" (911CR, 2004, 265) and the fact that "no one was firmly in charge" (p. 400). Commissioner Bob Kerrey would later admit, "There are ample reasons to suspect that there may be some alternative to what we outlined in our version [of the history of 9/11]" (quoted in Manjoo, 2006). Cofer Black, Director of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, felt "there were things the commissions [investigating 9/11] wanted to know about and things they didn't want to know about" (quoted in Froomkin, 2006). 70 per cent of the questions submitted to the commission by the Family Steering Committee were not answered, and by 2006 the Jersey Girls questioned "the veracity of the entire Commission's report" (Brynaert, 2006). The failure of the 9/11 Commission to fulfill its mandate is supported by the testimony of victims' families, the evidence of the report, the statements of the principal investigators, and public opinion. Media pundits and academics who ignore such evidence and instead deride outrageous conspiracy theories have so far chosen to ignore the legitimate forms of skepticism.

Recently, however, some academics have managed to voice strident criticism of the official 9/11 narrative in mainstream academic venues. In his 2007 book from the University of California Press, *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America*, Professor Peter Dale Scott declares: "9/11 was the largest homicide by far in American history, yet it has never been adequately investigated" (p. 194). Scott calls the *9/11 Commission Report* a "concerted cover-up, partly by omissions and just as important by its cherry-picking of evidence and contrived misrepresentations. More important, there is a consistent pattern in all this: to minimize [Vice President Dick] Cheney's responsibility for what happened that day and conceal unexplained and disturbing actions by him" (pp. 194–195). Scott devotes two chapters of his book to this "pattern." Scott's approach to the omissions and misrepresentations of the Report is measured and responsible, and he reiterates his belief that "the public still does not know what happened on September 11, 2001" (p. 231). He writes that when asked to summarize his opinion of what happened on 9/11, he answers that he is "sure of one thing only: that there has been a significant cover-up of vital issues" (p. 234). This is a perfectly reasonable conclusion, one often derided by mainstream media and

academics because it does not provide an elaborate alternative explanation.

In 2010 in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, a leading journal in the social sciences for over 50 years, Laurie A. Manwell discussed 9/11 in terms of State Crimes Against Democracy (SCAD), a concept taken up by Lance deHaven-Smith (2006). In a ranging survey of social psychological theories that explain how and why people have difficulty accepting the fact that sometimes representatives of the State commit horrendous crimes against their own citizens, Manwell argues that “social truth and justice movements and reform initiatives need to include strategies for resolving the cognitive dissonance and worldview defense reactions that their claims and proposals regarding SCADs inevitably provoke” (Manwell, 2010, p. 858). Manwell explores a range of theories that explain why people continue to cling to a political system that betrays them: “Naïve realism, cognitive dissonance, TMT [Terror Management Theory], and SJT [System Justification Theory] all indicate that what generally supports the persistence of preexisting worldviews — particularly in the face of evidence to the contrary — is uncertainty reduction and threat management” (p. 863). Manwell cites a number of scholars who have demonstrated the inadequacies of the government investigation and account of 9/11, scholars with book-length analyses of the evidence that are ignored by mainstream cultural studies, before arriving at this provocative conclusion:

To preserve what is left of North American democracy — and our responsibility for tolerance and restraint toward citizens of nondemocratic states — the culture of fear and political intolerance and a governing dissociative mindset of “democracy for the few” must be subjected to immediate serious public scrutiny and debate. This must begin with the thorough and scientific vetting of evidence that contradicts the U.S. government’s official account of 9/11, on which two wars of aggression have been predicated, with the possibility of a third looming in the near future; for it was this event, more than any other in modern history, that has precipitated an epochal change in the social psychology of “We, the People.” (p. 870)

Not long after Manwell’s article appeared, sociologist David MacGregor and economist Paul Zarembka, who had previously edited a collection of essays examining the evidence for 9/11 (Zarembka,

2006), published an article in *Socialism and Democracy* that condemned “hostility on the left to research findings regarding 9–11” (2010, p. 141) and articulated a Marxist theory of conspiracy in which “the fundamental Marxist notion that the capitalist state is a masked form of bourgeois rule . . . is itself an accusation of conspiracy on the grandest of historical scales” (p. 143). Positing the events surrounding the ascent of Louis Bonaparte as potentially historically analogous to 9/11, MacGregor and Zarembka suggest a “deep-political” Marxist analysis for 9/11 (p. 150). They reach a conclusion similar to Manwell’s:

Like the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, September 11 unfurled a bleak era of capitalist reaction. And, like Bonaparte’s coup d’etat in France, the fiery events in New York and Washington initiated a harsh suppression of thought and opinion in the United States that quelled liberal and left opposition. Most especially, the official story of 9–11 became the holy-of-holies, unassailable truth, a new form of Biblical belief. Indeed, the official dog and pony show featuring the 19 alleged hijackers is still the lynch-pin for President Barack Obama’s pursuit of the conflict in Afghanistan and expansion of the war into Pakistan. Thus, from our perspective, the global anti-war movement needs seriously to question 9–11 if it wishes to be truly effective. Though it seems improbable now, there are reasons to believe that 9–11 may eventually force a new Marxist understanding of the capitalist state, more in line with Marx’s view of the fragility of bourgeois democracy, the dangers of bourgeois terrorism, and capital’s readiness to resort to states of siege. (p. 161)

Anthony Hall, a professor of globalization studies, published his critique of the official 9/11 narrative in *Earth Into Property: Colonization, Decolonization, and Capitalism*, a 2010 book from a respected university press that was also hailed as one of the best books of 2010 by *The Independent* (Howe, 2010). Hall’s case is exemplary of the difficulties faced by academics who wish to critique part of the 9/11 evidence without appearing to endorse comprehensive theories about the attacks. Hall writes, “By far the largest weight of evidence points away from the official story towards controlled demolitions [of the WTC towers] and a missile strike [at the Pentagon]” (Hall, 2010, p. 640). In order to explain my own specific thoughts about

the evidence, I would have to explain in great detail why I do not believe the “no plane at the Pentagon” theory has any credibility,<sup>12</sup> but I do think the theory of controlled demolition possesses some merits and deserves additional scrutiny. Rather than explain the faults with the missile theory, I will explain some of the merits of the controlled demolition theory. Consider the evidence that suggests the WTC towers were demolished.

According to engineering analyses of the WTC towers prior to 9/11 the towers were “sixteen times stiffer than a conventional structure” (Glanz and Lipton, 2003, pp. 134–136), and damage far worse than that experienced on 9/11 could be tolerated and “the building would still be strong enough to withstand a 100-mile-per-hour wind” (p. 133). Les Robertson, one of the original structural engineers, assured experts there is “little likelihood of a collapse no matter how the building [is] attacked” (p. 227). After the 1993 bombing, John Skilling, the towers’ Chief Engineer, said the towers could withstand an airplane impact “without collapsing” (pp. 131–132). Prior to 9/11, Skilling testified that the towers would withstand jet fuel fires in the event of a crash and “the building structure would still be there” (Quoted in Nalder, 1993). Frank A. Demartini, the on-site construction manager for the World Trade Center, claimed just months prior to 9/11 that the towers could withstand “multiple impacts of jetliners” (Quoted in Dwyer and Flynn, p. 149).

As reported by *The New York Times*, “experts said no . . . modern, steel-reinforced high-rise had ever collapsed because of an uncontrolled fire” (Glanz, 2001). The lack of a precedent for collapses that happened three times on 9/11 thus presented skeptics with a compelling anomaly. In addition, demolition experts attested to the demolition-like appearance of the collapses, which were rapid, symmetrical, and total, and included high velocity horizontal bursts of debris well below the collapse wave. “The collapse of the WTC towers looked like a classic controlled demolition,” according to Mike Taylor of the National Association of Demolition Contractors (Samuel and Carrington, 2001). Structural engineer Ronald Hamburger told *The Wall Street Journal*, “It appeared to me that charges had been placed in the building.” In the same article Charles H. Thornton, chairman of

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<sup>12</sup> For example, skeptics of the impact at the Pentagon have never been able to explain away the photographic evidence of debris from an American Airlines jet on the Pentagon front lawn, the downed light posts in the path of the jet, and the dozens of eyewitnesses who saw a passenger jet hit the Pentagon.

the structural engineering firm Thornton-Tomasetti Group, said, "I was absolutely flabbergasted when [the collapses] happened – that it happened at all, and that it happened in less than three or four hours" (Hallinan, Burton and Eig, 2001). Van Romero, explosives expert and Vice President for Research at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, told the *Albuquerque Journal* on 9/11, "My opinion is, based on the videotapes, that after the airplanes hit the World Trade Center there were some explosive devices inside the buildings that caused the towers to collapse" (Quoted in Uyttebrouck, 2001). Romero later retracted his statement asserting the presence of explosive devices inside the towers, and is placed here alongside other experts who say they do not believe there were explosives in the towers (despite appearances to the contrary).

The apparent paradox of expert testimony that says, yes, the collapses looked exactly like controlled demolitions, but, no, there were no explosives in the towers, creates a space of ambiguity for non-experts. The government investigations into the collapses did little to resolve this. Two investigative reports for the WTC collapses were eventually published, one by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 2002, and the other by the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) in 2005. From the beginning, these investigations were plagued with compromises similar to the 9/11 Commission. A January 2002 editorial by Bill Manning in the respected journal *Fire Engineering* called the FEMA investigation "a half-baked farce" (Manning, 2002). The FEMA report concludes, "With the information and time available, the sequence of events leading to the collapse of each tower could not be definitively determined" (FEMA, 2002: "Executive Summary," p. 2). Regarding Tower Seven, FEMA states, "The specifics of the fires in WTC 7 and how they caused the building to collapse remain unknown at this time" (FEMA, 2002: "Section 8," p. 7). Dr. S. Shyam Sunder, the head of the NIST investigation into WTC7, admitted in *New York Magazine*, "We've had trouble getting a handle on building number seven" (Quoted in Jacobson, 2006). In August 2008 NIST released its Tower Seven investigation, in which it attributed the collapse to a "new phenomenon" called "thermal expansion." NIST declared WTC7 "the first known instance of fire causing the total collapse of a tall building." NIST also admitted that several floors of WTC7 fell at freefall speed for 2.25 seconds, a physical impossibility without the aid of incendiary devices. NIST did not use any steel from WTC7 in its investigation, but instead relied on elaborate computer models.

The NIST study spent much more time and money than FEMA on its investigation of the Twin Towers, and published a remarkable 10,000 pages in the final report; however, skeptics saw problems with the parameters of the investigation and the conclusions reached. For example, NIST does not attempt to explain phenomena after collapse initiation is achieved; its investigation “does not actually include the structural behavior of the tower after the conditions for collapse initiation were reached and collapse became inevitable” (NIST, 2005, p. 82). NIST confirmed its inability to explain why the towers experienced total collapses in a letter it wrote September 27, 2007, in response to a Request for Correction written by a group of researchers and 9/11 family members: “In the case of the WTC towers, NIST has established that the failures initiated in the floors affected by the aircraft impact damage and the ensuing fires resulted in the collapses of the towers. . . . We are unable to provide a full explanation of the total collapse.”<sup>13</sup> While NIST maintains it “found no corroborating evidence to suggest that explosives were used to bring down the buildings,” it also admits it “did not conduct tests for explosive residue and as noted above, such tests would not necessarily have been conclusive.” Therefore, the parameters of NIST’s study did not include the actual collapses, NIST did not test for explosive residue, and NIST cannot explain the total collapses; however, NIST asserts it is certain there is no evidence of the use of explosives in the WTC towers.

Supporters of the official narrative often cite the plane crashes as the obvious causes of the collapses; however, this is not the official theory. NIST states: “The towers likely would not have collapsed under the combined effects of aircraft impact damage and the extensive, multi-floor fires if the thermal insulation had not been widely dislodged or had been only minimally dislodged by aircraft impact” (2005, p. xxxviii). Thus the official theory supposes fire-induced collapses of two steel-reinforced skyscrapers, of which there are no precedents, happening in 56 and 102 minutes after impact. The NIST theory also argues the fires were not very hot, never rising “above 600 degrees C for as long as 15 minutes” (p. 180). In addition, when NIST tested their own physical models of the fires, they could not make the models collapse, even though NIST applied fires hotter and longer lasting than the fires of 9/11 (p. 143). Given the failure of the physical models, NIST resorted to a computer model of the WTC towers. For the computer models, NIST employed the most “severe”

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.911proof.com/NIST.pdf>

data for “each of the most influential variables,” because with the moderate forms of data “it became clear that the towers would likely remain standing” (pp. 143–144). The NIST investigation was criticized by Dr. James Quintiere, former Chief of the Fire Science Division of NIST, who called NIST’s conclusion “questionable” and called for an independent review of NIST’s work. Quintiere is not alone in his criticism of the NIST investigation: over 1,500 architects and engineers belong to the Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, a group “dedicated to exposing the falsehoods and to revealing truths about the ‘collapses’ of the WTC high-rises on 9/11/01” (ae911truth.org).

Skeptics also find the oral histories of the first responders compelling. Many skeptics believe these eyewitness accounts support the controlled demolition theory. Professor Graeme MacQueen identified 118 witnesses to explosions, of the 503 witnesses in the oral histories (MacQueen, 2006; all quotations are from MacQueen, unless otherwise noted). For example, Richard Banaciski witnessed an “explosion” in the South Tower: “It seemed like on television they blow up these buildings. It seemed like it was going all the way around like a belt, all these explosions.” Gregg Brady heard “three loud explosions” under the North Tower, and Edward Cachia said that the South Tower “gave at a lower floor, not the floor where the plane hit, because we originally had thought there was like an internal detonation explosives because it went in succession, boom, boom, boom, boom, and then the tower came down.” Assistant Commissioner Stephen Gregory saw “low-level flashes” before the South Tower came down: “You know like when they demolish a building, how when they blow up a building, when it falls down? That’s what I thought I saw.” *Wall Street Journal* reporter John Bussey also witnessed what appeared to be a synchronized event at the South Tower: “I . . . looked up out of the office window to see what seemed like perfectly synchronized explosions coming from each floor . . . One after the other, from top to bottom, with a fraction of a second between, the floors blew to pieces” (Quoted in Griffin, 2006, p. 24). Firefighter Kenneth Rogers also witnessed synchronized explosions: “There was an explosion in the south tower . . . I kept watching. Floor after floor after floor. One floor under another after another and when it hit about the fifth floor, I figured it was a bomb, because it looked like a synchronized deliberate kind of thing. I was there in ’93” (p. 30).

In 2009 a group of scientists published results of a study of WTC dust in a peer-reviewed journal, which revealed unreacted thermitic material in the dust (Harrit et al., 2009). The finding suggested the

chemical trace of a “highly engineered explosive” in the WTC dust. To date, no scientific studies have attempted to replicate these results.

Finally, it is worth noting that the government experts themselves forwarded different explanations for the collapses; the official explanation endured a series of modifications: from the “core meltdown” theory, to the “column failure” theory, to the “truss failure” theory, to the final theory of the NIST investigation, a hybrid version of the column failure theory in which fires made the trusses sag, which pulled the perimeter columns inward, which transferred column instability and led to global collapse. If the causes of the collapses were not obvious to government experts, and the final theory rests on tenuous assumptions, unprecedented occurrences, and computer modeling, why should skepticism be considered beyond the pale?

### **Lessons for Anarchist Cultural Studies**

There are lessons to be learned for anarchist cultural studies from the case of 9/11 skepticism. First, a comprehensive study of 9/11, unlike the analysis prepared by the 9/11 Commission, would reveal more than just the problematic nature of the official narrative; it would reveal lessons about State governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Liberals and progressives tend to avoid interrogating 9/11 because they cannot see the political advantage; that is, the State’s mechanisms of secrecy and propaganda are now so well-refined that most reformists see no gain in challenging them, and in many cases liberals are afraid of the censoring hand of the State because it could affect the electoral process (i.e., you cannot run in the two-party duopoly US system if you express doubts about the official 9/11 narrative). However, we cannot begin the essential process of dismantling the national security state if we do not understand and confront its secrecy and brutality first, a step that does not require one to believe 9/11 was an “inside job,” but instead requires an intelligentsia that will not be bullied by public opinion or State propaganda (such as the repeated claim that the 9/11 Commission was a bipartisan study of uncompromised veracity).

Second, an anarchist perspective on 9/11 is valuable because anarchists do not seek justice from the State; that is, the investigation of 9/11 is an extreme example, for those who do not already understand the authoritarian propensity of the State, of how the State can conceal essential information from its citizens, torture suspects,

suspend the rule of law, and exploit tragedy for imperial conquests, even when the event in question is considered (largely by State propagandists) a serious attack on democracy, respect for human life and dignity, and respect for the rule of law (or, in President Bush's famous declaration, 9/11 articulated how "they hate our freedoms" or "our way of life"). The State's disdain for its citizens on and around the events of 9/11 goes beyond the machinations of the Bush White House and the intelligence agencies: consider, for example, the declaration by Environmental Protection Agency director Christine Todd Whitman in the days following 9/11 that the "air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink" at Ground Zero, a statement that doomed thousands of first responders and local residents to experience debilitating and even fatal respiratory ailments. Consider also the City of New York's fight to avoid paying for the full health care costs of the 9/11 first responders, the same people used by politicians for jingoistic portraits on the campaign trail.

Finally, the investigation of 9/11 exemplifies a longstanding trend in American federal politics: the most powerful in America do not investigate themselves, even when forced to by extraordinary circumstances. Whether to protect criminal activities or to avoid exposing their own failures, the most serious crimes involving US state officials tend to be followed by ineffectual, perhaps criminally negligent, official investigations. The examples of fraudulent government investigations of seminal events in US politics include the Warren Commission's investigation of JFK's assassination (Fonzi, 1993; McKnight, 2005; Meagher, 1967; Weisberg, 1994), the FBI's investigation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination (Pepper, 2008), the Iran-Contra investigation (Walsh, 1997), and now the 9/11 Commission.

The philosopher David Coady (2006) writes,

The extent to which it is rational to be sceptical of conspiracy theories partly depends on the extent to which it is rational to suppose that the official institutions responsible for gathering and disseminating information in one's society are trustworthy. Hence, the legitimacy of conspiracy theorizing depends, not only on the content of the conspiracy theory in question and the content of its official rival, but also on the social and political context in which it takes place. This fact should make us wary of any *a priori* attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. (p. 10)

An anarchist study of 9/11 skepticism should begin with these basic presumptions: to be wary of *a priori* attacks on the skeptics; to be conscious of the level of contemporary State and corporate deception; to be aware of what Coady (2006) calls “the error of being excessively unwilling to believe conspiracy theories,” an error that is “more widespread and far more insidious” (p. 9) than the “fundamental attribution error,” the tendency to overemphasize “dispositional” explanations over the “situational.”

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