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The Shadow State-form of Thought: Cultural Studies and Conceptual Strategies

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Abstract

This essay is a response to Michael Truscello's article in this issue. It argues against an overreliance on evidence as a mark of distinguishing political research from conspiracy theories. Cultural studies research can also disrupt the dominant conceptual mechanisms of measuring truth, by disabling a concept like "conspiracy theories." This opens a space for inventing new concepts to address the varieties of skepticism as well as the types of faith in reason. Anarchist cultural studies can thus be one that interrogates what Deleuze and Guattari call "the State-form of thought," deployed not just by institutions but in molecular conceptual practices.

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Before responding to Michael Truscello's article, let me first commend him and Sander Hicks for putting this issue together. Addressing the relations between any two of the three topics herein (anarchism, cultural studies, conspiracy theories) would be cause enough for affirmation. But putting all three together is truly innovative and most welcome.

I'm glad to be given a chance to revisit my conspiracy panics work which consumed so much of my time for well over a decade, but that has now receded somewhat into the background as I take on other projects.[1] Truscello's essay has not only contextualized the cultural studies work on conspiracy theories I already knew, but introduced me to new scholarly developments (ones with which I'm happy to align myself). My comments are therefore offered in the spirit of affinity, from a position much closer to my interlocutors than might appear at first glance. As Truscello points out, out of the four cultural studies approaches to the phenomenon of conspiracy theories addressed, mine is nearest his own. Therefore, I will do my best to avoid exaggerate our distinctions, what Freud called the "narcissism of small differences."

Truscello insightfully points out that 9/11 dissent is marginalized in cultural studies as it is in most leftist intellectual work. It is as though the revival of the antiwar spirit during the Bush Jr. years occluded the defining trauma from earlier in the decade, much like the late 1960s antiwar movement marginalized the questions around Kennedy's assassination. Truscello reminds us to not live in denial. There is also a very timely dimension to his discussion of the authenticity of Bin Laden confessions. I write this scarcely a month since the Mayday invasion of Pakistan that ostensibly assassinated OBL. Readers should bring Truscello's skepticism to bear on the alleged recovery of the OBL video trove. Hopefully someone is right now writing about the flurried discourse around establishing the authenticity of OBL's body, identity, agency, personality (e.g., images of his narcissism).

His essay also collects key research that pokes holes in the 9/11 Commission, giving already existing primary sources a new audience in an academic setting. It's a kind of academic aggregator model, one that mirrors the very investigative process at work in what

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[1] Interestingly, some of my recent work on social media and Egyptian revolts has been called a conspiracy theory, and from people I presume have no knowledge about my book!

I have called "Collective Intelligence Agencies" (referring to 9/11 amateur investigators while de-emphasizing whether the research is conspiracy-oriented or not). But I do find points of divergence from this strategy of truth-telling. When the essay overemphasizes the display of evidence I find it repeating discursive moves within the current regime of truth, one detrimental to dissent. What I want to highlight in my reply, then, is the trap of relying on evidence to distinguish and ground cultural studies work, as well as propose other strategies. Finally, since so many people have asked me for it, I will by the end of this essay offer my opinion on the events of 9/11.

Early in Truscello's essay we see a desire to put forth an analysis based on a distinction between "conspiracy theories and legitimate skepticism." In the former category, Truscello places the "no plane hit the Pentagon" claim. I was immediately perplexed when I read that, as some of my very smart friends adhere to the notion that no plane hit the pentagon, and offer plenty of evidence to make their case. And yet this position is said to have no basis in fact. Later, Truscello cites a scholar who subscribes to the "no plane" thesis. Truscello avoids spending too much time arguing against this position, mostly because it is *presumed* to be untrue, and to lack credibility.

A conspiracy theory, then, seems to be defined as that which *lacks* evidence, rather than another account that provides evidence to be countered. The other position is polemically removed from legitimate standing, rather than being treated as a position with claims with which we might disagree (the courtroom model of public opinion). [Standard caveat here: I am not affirming this particular hypothesis, only affirming the fact that making a claim around evidence to determine which hypothesis is a "conspiracy theory" ignores the discursive position of the no plane hypothesis (which says "we have evidence") but moreover seeks to exempt other 9/11 hypotheses (e.g., controlled demolitions in WTC) from being considered a CT because it has better evidence.] Of course it might be the case that in the game of truth-telling based on evidence, one hypothesis might become more compelling than another, but there's no need to bring in a term like *conspiracy theory* to demarcate *any* of them.

For Truscello, the best conceptual strategy involves the power of evidence, with the hopes of being backed up by more and more scholars who could comprise an unassailable (or at least not-easily-dismissed) mass. I'm less confident in this strategy. Even if the evidence is preponderant, and a half million researchers sign up for 9/11 Scholars for Truth, the effects can be easily voided. First, it

presumes the power of scholarship (as opposed to *selected* expertise in a discourse). I am reminded here of the debates around global warming or evolution, and how curricula in certain US locales are being organized to reflect creationism as a legitimate option despite the abundance of opposing scholars. Second, it presumes the power of numbers. Here I think of George W. Bush's description of 500,000 NYC antiwar protestors in 2003 as a "focus group." Of course, this didn't halt the movement, but it did demonstrate that discourse is not about numbers or about evidence, but about a power of decision — as the capacity to determine the legitimate standing of claimants, as well as how the information can turn into action.

Richard Hofstatder (1965), in his canonical essay, offered a dismissive rhetorical move that has subsequently been taken up by anti-conspiracy theory discourse. This handy weapon says that evidence is *part of* the paranoid style. Hofstadter calls it "pseudo scholarship" and other conspiracy panickers add that conspiracy theory's attention to detail is a kind of overcompensation. So even evidence becomes a sign of its opposite — the illegitimacy of the knowledge, a symptom of it being "not even wrong." Truscello, via Mannwell, points out well that there is a serious psychological dimension to panickers' investment in the dominant order. If denial, self-delusion, attachment to masters, and desire for affective security are what drive the hostile anti-CT counterattacks, then more evidence just makes a louder bang when hitting their security wall. Why not deprive the wall-makers of their bricklaying tools?

With this discursive approach in mind, I want to read differently the two examples Truscello examines. [Standard Caveat on the other side here: proposing these counterreadings does not signal any agreement with them. My goal is to situate evidence-strategies within broader discourses]. Case 1: Evidence of insider trading. Yes, there is much to be investigated here. The anomalous trading just before 9/11 cannot easily be explained away. But evidence of insider trading is not necessarily linked to evidence of an inside job regarding the attacks. Insider trading could also be folded into the official narrative. Obviously, the 9/11 attacks were known beforehand by *some* people (it was planned after all). *Who* had this foreknowledge is another story. If global finance markets are indeed tied up with guns, oil, warfare (state and nonstate actors), etc., then this foreknowledge, even if held by nonstate jihadists, could have spread to agents involved in speculative markets. That knowledge could have diffused to traders for put options. Al-Qaeda (if it is an actual organization) has been

noted to have ties to financial networks, meaning *its* foreknowledge could have resulted in put option spikes. What is needed of course is a more thorough investigation into knowledge-diffusion. But we can't know the culprits in advance.

Case 2: Evidence of corruption of the 9/11 Commission. Again, a very persuasive account here of the shenanigans that set the Commission up to fail and severely limited its reach. And it too could be folded into the "Al-Qaeda did it" account of 9/11. Like many instances of corrupt investigations, this one could have been rigged to protect key personnel from being blamed for being asleep at the switch. The whitewash could be said to be protecting Bush-Cheney from looking incompetent rather than supercompetent. The Commission's failure could be a case of an internecine blame game and protection for future elections. This would be the position of Richard Clarke when he claims that the "fix is in," as he is surely no 9/11 skeptic.

This multiple reading is partially why polls on the Commission are not reliable as evidence for any particular position (depending on how they're worded). Without a more thorough analysis of the polling mechanism, all we get is a general suspicion of the Commission, which could just as easily be a Democrat's skepticism seeking to punish Bushites for incompetence as it is a LIHOP or MIHOP position.

But there is something more here. It's not just that a strategy of truth-telling based on evidence can be "spun" in the manner of any court (of law or of public opinion). More important here is that evidence is used to distinguish what Truscello calls "legitimate skepticism" from "half-baked conspiracy theories" which are "ridiculous and sometimes hateful theories that are incongruent with the evidence." These terms, often associated with CTs, could just as easily be applied to *any* 9/11 skepticism.

I like to make the analogy to the term "white trash." "Conspiracy theory" is similar insofar as people are constantly denying the term should be applied to them, but are happy to pass the buck onto someone nearby (from the trailer to the mountain shack, from the WTC to the Pentagon). In both cases, the desire to legitimate one's own particular investments override a strategic analysis of the broader discourse. We might wish to legitimate ourselves against others in a game organized around a particular rationality, but there are more powerful discourses and social agents who rig that game. While we might want to separate the wheat from the chaff, we're in a system where official rationality determines that all grains are poisons. In

other words, all attempts to sort accounts by classifying some as CTs is akin to calling them crazy. Not that they are unverifiable, unconvincing, unable to meet standards of proof, but illegitimate, not credible, not worthy of having standing, "not even wrong." This is why I find it troubling to say a competing account lacks "any epistemological legitimacy." Legitimacy is a matter of standing, a position with merit *to be* a position.

There is a conspiracy research community out there: bookstores, online pages, forums, discussions, physical presence in streets, magazines, books, dialogues/ responses — a conspiracy *archipelago.* That is enough to warrant legitimacy to its positions. Whether or not we take its truth effects is another matter. To put it another way: would we also say the official version of 9/11 has no epistemological legitimacy (as a party with standing in a case, regardless of its accuracy or even believability)?

What we have here is an ambivalent moment. Truscello is doing something one would hope would happen more often in cultural studies: bringing into theory the dynamics and practices of a social movement. In recent years we've seen more of a call for this kind of relationship between theory and praxis: not devising concepts relevant to activism "out there," but understanding that concepts emerge from the movements themselves.

However, in this case, the conspiracy research community carries with it a dynamic that we should pause before repeating; namely, the easy naming of others in the network as being not just incorrect, but illegitimate (usually around words associated with irrationality). What does it mean for someone in that network (already called a group of conspiracy theorists) to call someone else a conspiracy theorist? It is, in Foucault's (1997) term, a *polemic* in which interlocutors are considered combatants, enemies to be vanquished. It is done on the Left with regard to anything considered a CT, and is done among conspiracy researchers in their desire to distinguish themselves.

There is a practical dimension to this theoretical repetition. Let's say enough people are convinced that the 9/11 Commission was so corrupt that further investigation is warranted. The tricky next step is determining how the new investigative body would be assembled and empowered. Here we would need to ask a practical question: if another commission or investigation were to be empanelled, would the "no plane Pentagon" account be allowed in for research? If not, we would find ourselves playing the same game, with different players in the same roles.

I would argue that, rather than turn to official bodies with a vested interest, one looks to the already existing networks of researchers. Create spaces for the expansion of their investigations, defend them against interference and charges of hyperpathy (a.k.a., extremism), give them access to records and documents, and use the mainstream fascination with "crowdsourcing" to mobilize action and present findings (in a self-organized, self-regulated manner). In this way, one could expand a constituent skepticism tied to action not apathy.

All of this, to me, is what "generated discursively" means (Truscello, this volume, p. 36) A discursive analysis evinces the conceptual politics at work in marginalizing dissent. The question then is how to best respond to, resist, and undermine this discourse. Why not disrupt its ability to make a conceptual move, especially an opening gambit that depends on the legitimacy of the term "conspiracy theory"? As should be apparent by now, my work seeks to defuse the power of the term conspiracy theory. For me, conspiracy theory is *itself* an illegitimate term, rather than a name for an illegitimate knowledge.

Other authors, in cultural studies and elsewhere, take CT as a legitimate object of study. They often reify it (as a result of drive, of misplaced ideological critique, or at least having an internal structure). And of course the term tends to be applied only to dissenting accounts. Rarely do cultural studies' works take the official narrative of 9/11 as something resulting from over-investment in xenophobia, in excessive trust in news sources/pundits/state press releases, or filling an existential gap in an otherwise meaningless world. When was it asked if the Bush regime (and anyone who believed in the official narrative) suffered from "agency panic"? It is significant that the question *doesn't get asked.* When do we look for what's *behind* an account (psychological makeup of the proponents, historical experience of the believers, social symptom of an ethnic group)? For whom do we reserve such *dietrological* analyses?[2]

To put it simply, I'm not convinced that conspiracy theories exist (as referents). Thus, it makes no sense to me to say that I "avoid questions regarding the very definition of conspiracy theory." My book does not seek to define CT, but does start with how CT is defined in conspiracy panic discourse. Why would an agnostic be preoccupied with defining God? I know that they exist as discursive positions,

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[2] Alisdair Spark (1998) coined this term, meaning "behind-ology".

much like we can say there are plenty of actions performed under the name of a God whose empirical existence is doubted. My work is deliberately liminal in this way. This is not just a postmodern conceptual preference; it plays out in practice. Using this ambivalence, I have been able to organize a panel on "9/11 and the Left" for an annual Left Forum (to the consternation of some involved in the conference planning). It included two of this journal's contributors (Sander Hicks and Bill Weinberg). I have taken on Leftists in print regarding their approach to conspiracy research, while also being heckled by Truthers at a presentation for not affirming their truth-claims.[3] I am fine with this in-between position, as part of my goal is to have a more open dialogue on the Left about its internal policing of dissent, minor knowledges, popular culture, and tactics. The regulation of conspiracy research is a key example of creating "hegemonic oppositional" discourse.

I am not an investigative reporter, nor one that easily aggregates others' investigative research. I leave that to other more capable people.[4] My book examines trust and faith in Reason, what John Fiske (1994) calls "strategies of disbelief." Because of this, my work has been reproached, in good anti-postmodern fashion, for having "no guard rails." And in a sense, if the discursive world were organized around my approach to CTs it might indeed look flattened and indeterminate. If there is any world proposed in my work it is more modest, though perhaps just as utopian. It is a world in which the term "conspiracy theory" would not be able to carry a political charge, one where the discourse or individual wielding it would look as anachronistic as someone discrediting a narrative by noting that the researcher has been possessed by demons. Once we are liberated from the term conspiracy theory we can refresh the work of political analysis. And with that we can renew the potentials for effective dissent and radical skepticism.

What I have proposed in my book, however, is not a world, a worldview, or an episteme, but a tactic. I'm sure that a new reterritorialization would take place after eliminating the effectiveness of the term of "conspiracy theory." Judgments would go on, distinctions

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3   This heckling involved numerous interruptions, mostly by one person whose evidence-based outbursts included "It's Physics! Newton!"

4   One of these researchers cited by Truscello, Bryan Sacks, will be joining my PhD program at Rutgers soon. I'm looking forward to working with him.

would be made. Hopefully this recoding would involve a democratizing process of constituent skepticism, one that would subvert authority at the very foundation of institutions. A boy can dream, can't he?

My book, on conspiracy *panics* (the discourses that take CTs to be a problem), while faithful to the spirit of defending marginalized knowledges, does not go far enough empirically, according to the author. For instance, I am grouped with the "cultural studies practitioners" whose "common opinion" is that the 9/11 Commission Report wasn't flawed enough to warrant further investigation. Again I would say that the book's "lack" of a clear stance on the validity of the Commission's findings is a matter of conceptual strategy.

I do speak about the pernicious effects of accepting the Commission's underlying belief and findings in State incompetence.[5] I criticize writers on the Left who take the Commission's "incompetence theory" as a given. I lay out quite clearly the implications of accepting this premise: "The incompetence theory essentially explains a catastrophic event by positing a lack of foresight, communication, ability, qualification, or readiness within the State. With all of these lacks, it is a short step to call for a proper corrective: namely, filling in the lack with *more* (centralization, state intervention, suspension of normal procedures, resources for security, executive powers). The "magic lack theory" creates gaps so they can be filled, bolstering sagging processes and augmenting strength (especially regarding state security power). It also acts magically as a *preventive* theory: it wards off questions of intent and action" (p. 147). One can begin to see an anarchism here — pointing out to Leftists and others how their alignments lead to further State entrenchments.

More than clarifying my own research, however, at stake here is the definition and role of cultural studies. Obviously, I agree with Truscello that the goal should not be to understand dissenting practices and knowledges as symptoms of underlying psychological or even sociological conditions. This is the approach of a conservative cultural studies, often found in more mainstream books with authors that find themselves moving easily through media outlets.

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[5] Elsewhere (2010) I have talked about the 9/11 Truth Movement as a "collective intelligence agency" that emerges in the ruins of two investigative bodies (the Commission and professional journalism, which have both failed in their missions). I'm not expecting the author to have read all my work — just mentioning it in case the reader wants more elaboration.

Their work bolsters legitimacy for hegemonic opinion (and by this I don't mean popular opinion, but the articulated common sense that preserves elite power). Sometimes, as Truscello argues (and finds support in with Giroux), cultural studies ought to be a committed research project that sides with dissent, passionately defending the marginal. It might also mean, as Mark Fenster (2008) has argued, providing conceptual tools that allow us to make significant distinctions regarding which popular knowledges are worth championing and which ones worth condemning.

As I've already been arguing, there are other strategies worthy of the name of cultural studies. For one thing, there are already academics (not necessarily in cultural studies) doing the kind of work Truscello calls for (Griffin, Dale Scott, his own). Should all cultural studies be devoted to sorting out and measuring the truth-value of the various accounts of 9/11? Or should some perhaps disrupt the very mechanisms of measurement already at work? Perhaps the question of measure itself should be reopened? It might be enough to jam the current dominant mechanisms opening a space for others to invent new concepts that justly name the varieties of skepticism, as well as the types of faith in reason.

The conclusion of Truscello's article is quite agreeable. I find it compelling, though I'm not sure what makes it particularly anarchist. Is it the focus on the state rather than capital? What is the anarchist intellectual? I would note here the difference between Sartrian intellectual models of "telling truth to power" vs. Foucault's notion of a specific intellectual (which seeks to disrupt the modes of power/knowledge at work in one's own institution). Truscello and I are more aligned when we are engaged in the latter (e.g., the very existence of this special issue is an important intervention into cultural studies and scholarship more generally). We are less aligned when the conceptual strategy tends towards the former, which I have been arguing is where the wager on evidence ends up. Telling truth to power is still a way of *petitioning* power (or its phantom public) for recognition and legitimacy. And it often entails polemically diminishing others in the dissent network along the way.

The anarchist cultural studies I'm more interested in is one that interrogates what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call "the State-form of thought." Anarchism involves unleashing a constituent skepticism against the state-form, not only in macro-institutional bodies but in the molecular interactions of thought, especially an overcoding that establishes a hierarchy of terms around propriety (proper forms

of politics, proper types of investigation, proper modes of reason). This is an anarchism that seeks to prevent an accumulation of power by proliferating enunciations that allow new subjects to emerge. It makes words into war machines to prevent an accretion around centers and scapegoats.

And finally, since I am often asked for an opinion on 9/11, I will provide it here at the end. It's not as much of a position as it is a *vector*. What happened on 9/11? My serious and committed answer is: *it's worse than you think.*

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