Conspiracy theories: Back and to the Left? [1]

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A study [3]claiming that climate sceptics are more likely to (a) support the free market, and (b) believe in conspiracy theories has attracted a good deal of media attention recently, leading to such headlines as ?Climate change deniers ?are either extreme free marketeers or conspiracy theorists? [4]?. (Students of logic might like to consider how that headline diverges from the actual findings.)

This has naturally annoyed the aforementioned sceptics/deniers, who dispute [5]the researchers? claim that their blogs were invited to take part in the online survey that provided the study?s data. Regardless of whether or not this is true, the methodology used was about as impressive as the phrase ?online survey? implies. In 2010, a questionnaire was posted on the various climate change blogs where the two sides thrash the issue out, often in forthright tones. Questions involved belief in the extent of man?s contribution to global warming as well as one?s preferred economic system, the moon landings, Princess Diana?s death, Area 51 and other wacky conspiracy theories. Since it would not be difficult to guess the purpose of the survey, it strikes me that there was a non-trivial incentive for each side to use it to discredit the other by claiming to hold the opposing view on climate science whilst pretending to believe in every tinfoil hat idea on the list.

This is the kind of flaw that all researchers who rely on anonymous internet-based surveys completed by a self-selecting sample group must contend with. One would ordinarily hope that the false positives cancel each other out. However, in this instance, as the authors of the paper note, none of the climate sceptic websites took part, and so it is quite conceivable that ?debunkers? pretending to be ?deniers? made up a larger proportion of the responses.

That being said, it would come as no great surprise if free marketeers were more likely to be sceptical of climate change than left-wingers since many of the most prominent global warming advocates are on the left and many of the proposed solutions involve encroachments on economic or social liberties. There is, therefore, a greater motivation for them to seek out alternative hypotheses. Conversely, one might conclude that socialists are more likely to embrace the issue than right-wingers, and for the same reason, but since the study did not use a control group, we have no way of knowing if free marketeers are over-represented in the sceptic camp or if the numbers are what you would expect from a random sample of the population.

The (considerably weaker) relationship between climate change scepticism and conspiratorial thinking is more interesting and it made me wonder whether the study also found a link between free market beliefs and conspiracy theories. The researchers do not say?although they must have the data?and I would be

surprised if such a link exists. One striking aspect of David Aaronovich?s excellent book *Voodoo Histories* [6] is how many conspiracy theories are of the left. The two biggest conspiracy theories of the last century?the JFK assassination and the 9/11 ?inside job??surely do not correlate with free market beliefs. More likely, they correlate with the politics of Oliver Stone and Michael Moore, both of whom have managed to keep their careers on track despite publicly promoting some quite outrageous drivel.

I dare say that free market views would also not correlate with the belief that the invasion of Iraq was a ?war for oil? with Halliburton pulling the strings, or that Hilda Murrell, John Lennon, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and David Kelly were murdered by the government, or that the 2000 US presidential election was rigged, or that the government blew up New Orleans? levees during Hurricane Katrina, or, for that matter, that anyone who is sceptical about climate change is funded by the fossil fuel industry.

Perhaps I am being unfair. In many cases, conspiracy theories have no clear political undertones and their believers have an incoherent ideology at best. I would find it difficult to place David Icke, for example, anywhere on a traditional left-right axis. Yes, the moon landing ?hoax? involved Nixon and the cold war, but I would be surprised if its adherents are overwhelmingly of the left. Similarly, a belief in the ?assassination? of Marilyn Monroe does not obviously further any faction?s political agenda. It is possible that the Daily Express?s obsession with the death of Princess Diana has made that particular conspiracy theory more popular on the right in the UK, but it is probably popular with lunatics of all persuasions.

Aaronovich balances his book with two notable right-wing conspiracies: the absurd claims about Bill Clinton?s supposed orgiastic and murderous criminal syndicate, and the ?birther? cult surrounding Barack Obama. It seems that anyone who holds the office of US president can expect to become the subject of a conspiracy theory, and I do not seek to downplay the stupidity of these accusations when I say that they are of a different order to the JFK and 9/11 theories. The Clinton allegations were bizarre and became more so the longer he held office, but rumours of Slick Willy?s adultery were not entirely misplaced and the ?Clinton Body Count? was started largely as a response to the earlier ?Bush Body Count?. The Obama birth certificate ?scam?, while patently baseless and mildly racist, would have required only a petty criminal act and a handful of participants. Neither necessarily required the connivance of government and it is this, I think, that distinguishes a right-wing conspiracy theory from a left-wing conspiracy theory.

The theories of the right portray innocent individuals as criminals while the theories of the left blame the government for acts of evil committed by individuals (notably assassins and terrorists). This difference in outlook means that the left?s theories are on a much grander scale. The 9/11 ?plot? would have required years of planning and a cast of thousands all of whom would be forever expected to remain silent. The JFK conspiracy would have required at least a couple of hundred people in various branches of government to be in the know on the day, followed by thousands more in the subsequent ?cover up?. Both would have required immaculate preparation and execution on the part of multiple government agencies.

Herein lies the big problem with the most grandiose conspiracy theories. They require a degree of government competence which is rarely exhibited in their official activities. They depend on numerous arms of the state working together efficiently and effectively to orchestrate an event with meticulous attention to detail, on time, and without putting a foot wrong. And only a statist could believe in that.

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