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NEWSPAPER OP-EDS

Regimes of (Un)Truth: Conspiracy Theory and the Transnationalization of the Algerian Civil War

Paul A. Silverstein

Since
1992,
the
civil
war



Residents of Hattatba, Algeria examine blood-stained clothes after armed attackers killed six people in their village in March 1999. (AP Worldwide)

ravaging Algeria has claimed at least 100,000 lives. Through armed raids, village massacres, terrorist bombings and weekly kidnappings and assassinations, the war has victimized Algerian society as a whole, from the urban elites to the village poor. While the body count continues to rise, the war remains shrouded in a haze of uncertainty and lack of information. The violence, which has often targeted intellectuals and foreigners, has largely driven the international press out of the country. The military government exercises strict control over the local media, routinely censoring and suspending private newspapers in the name of state security. As a result, Algerian citizens at home and abroad must rely on either official press releases or informal accounts, both of which are of dubious accuracy.

Given this informational opacity, the proliferation of violence has generated a proliferation of conspiracy theories that seek to explain the violence by pointing a finger at one or another known agents. While the putative actors in the war--the state military and insurgent Islamist forces--are acknowledged, their motives and true identities are widely questioned. Circulating across the globe by word-of-mouth, scholarly journals and Internet list-serves, conspiracy theories question "*Qui tue?*" (or "Who is really killing?") and respond with answers as diverse as the Algerian government itself, the global Islamic fundamentalist terrorist network, French neo-colonial interests and, of course, the ever-present Central Intelligence Agency.

This article examines how such totalizing theories seek to provide transparent accounts of the opaque military actions and legal operations of the civil war. In particular, it explores how the multimedia circulation of conspiracy rhetoric creates a transnational space of vernacular knowledge production that challenges, and yet

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Humanitarian Crisis in Lebanon The Mountain Mail, Colorado

August 24, 2006
Sami Hermez

After passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 and the "cessation of hostilities," hundreds of thousands of displaced Lebanese venturing across bombed roads and returning to their destroyed home villages in the south.

Although Israel's aerial bombardment ended for the moment, Lebanon's humanitarian crisis continues to worsen because the UN has failed to address Israel's blockade needs of all the internally displaced.

These two major problems demand the world's urgent attention. [Full Story](#)

Deflating Middle East Extr Joel Beinin

August 10, 2006
TomPaine.com

President Bush and many other supporters of the current Israeli assault on Lebanon reoccupation of the Gaza Strip justify military actions on the grounds that Hezbollah do not recognize Israel to exist. Negotiating with "terrorists" is impossible, they claim, because Hezbollah exist only to destroy Israel. [Story >>](#)

The Rome Fiasco TomPaine.com

July 26, 2006
Chris Toensing

Two weeks into the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, the United States stands with two other countries Israel and Britain opposing an immediate ceasefire. Prime Minister Jawad al-Maliki, in

paradoxically legitimates, official information networks.

The Logic of Conspiracy

"A good conspiracy is an unprovable one....If you can prove it, they must have screwed up somewhere along the line."(1)

Conspiracy theories rely upon a particular narrative form that prioritizes internal consistency and coherence over perfect correspondence to some referential, observable truth. Since they do not operate according to a scientific method, dictums of falsifiability by external verification (à la Karl Popper) do not apply.(2) Instead, conspiracy theories can only be disproved through the demonstration of their logical inconsistency or through the elaboration of a further conspiracy theory that encompasses the original. Conspiracy paradigms tend to reproduce themselves in ever-expanding, grand unified theories.(3)

Conspiracy theories thus dovetail with a number of other communicative practices, including rumor,(4) folklore(5) and witchcraft accusations.(6) However, in making these connections, I am not implying that conspiracy thinking constitutes some pre-modern survival or anti-rational atavism.(7) Rather, as Evans-Pritchard showed for Azande witchcraft accusations, conspiracy theories do not question the fact that trees fall and that people are killed; they speculate only on why that particular tree fell or why this particular village was massacred. Indeed, the conspiracy genre presupposes and even fetishizes highly "modern" categories of causality and agency. It searches incessantly for causal chains linking the actions of intentional agents. It denies structural indeterminacy and inscrutability. As such, the conspiracy genre represents a completely modern phenomenon with a hypertrophied, rather than atrophied, rational structure.

As a contemporary hermeneutic, however, conspiracy theories remain profoundly ambivalent: They desire final truth while questioning its very possibility; they seek ultimate agency and intentionality while doubting others' credibility and search for unmanipulated knowledge (chunks of the "really real") while wondering if its very existence is not fabricated.(8) Or, to use an all too familiar trope: The truth is out there; we just can't quite get it. Lacking any such unmediated knowledge, conspiracy theories attempt to map an over-profusion of information into a coherent narrative web or master plot--what S. Paige Baty refers to as a "cartographic mode of remembering."(9) Viewed from a functionalist perspective, they represent, in Frederic Jameson's words, "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age...a desperate attempt to represent the late capitalist system" by those marginalized from it.(10) This restores an illusion of agency and control: "Conspiracies can be thwarted, earthquakes cannot."(11) In this sense, they should be seen as a completely reasonable and socially relevant response to the uncertainties of late modernity.

Given the circulation of conspiracy knowledge through elite circles (and back to those accused of the conspiracy itself), it seems inappropriate to reduce such a hermeneutic simply to the realm of economic, political and social marginalization. In the context of contemporary Algeria, conspiracy theories are the primary means through which information is exchanged and personal posturing accomplished in a "game of hermeneutic one-upmanship."(12) Though a game, it has serious implications. Conspiracy theories' legitimacy in Algeria derives largely from the tactical manipulation of knowledge and secrecy by the government and the military.

for reassurances that the Bush administration will "stay the course" in its Mesopotamian misadventure, demanded that they be halted forthwith. [Full Story>>](#)

Lebanon's Pain Won't be Israel's **The State, South Carol**

July 25, 2006

Stephen Sheehi

BEIRUT, Lebanon My family and I will be evacuated from the American University of Beirut, where I have been teaching for the past three years. We will leave Beirut with a knapsack each as we relocate to a new location where I will be assuming my new position at the University of South Carolina.

For three days in a row, we were supposed to be evacuated by the U.S. embassy. However, those plans canceled at the last moment. Speculation is that the embassy is evacuating American citizens who can't afford the luxury of living in the safety of a university campus. A good choice if the United States really cared, it would be to ask Israel to stop bombing Lebanon, which has killed more than 300 people, almost all civilians. Many have been killed, and much vital infrastructure has been demolished. [Full Story>>](#)

Letting Gaza Burn **TomPaine.com**

July 13, 2006

Chris Toensing

The captivity of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit is now over two weeks old, with no sign of a breakthrough, and a second front with Hizbullah now threatens to divert attention from the conflagration in Gaza.

Following Israel's grievously disproportionate military rejoinder to Shalit's capture, several Palestinian civilians, including one Israeli soldier, lie dead. A Gaza plant insured by American taxpayers has been ruined. Even Time magazine wants to know "Where is the U.S.?" [Full Story>>](#)

The occlusion of state power and restriction of "democratic" scrutiny (including censorship of the media and the interruption of multi-party elections) have contributed directly to the popularization of conspiracy theorizing as vernacular knowledge production. And such theorizing, by attributing government intentionality to the various processes of the civil war, reinforces state power at the very moment of its greatest challenge. While conspiracy theories may function as a marginalized critique, they can also serve as a prop for existing structures of political and economic inequality.(13)

The Paranoid Style of Algerian Politics

Until the late 1980s, scholarship on conspiracy focused almost exclusively on the American context. Drawing on the seminal 1964 essay by Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style of American Politics," studies emerging from the fields of history and sociology primarily approached conspiracy theories as a marginalized, right-wing extremist phenomenon.(14) Decrying the hermeneutic as "paranoia" or "unreason," scholars tended to treat conspiracy theories as anti-rational, un-democratic and, in the end, incompatible with a pluralist vision of American society.(15) Only recently, works in anthropology and cultural studies have sought to unseat this position, viewing the paranoia as being largely "within reason,"(16) if still likely "hysterical," often pathological, and potentially inimical both to those scapegoated and to society in general.(17) Since the 1960s, conspiracy thought has entered the mainstream as a response to the breakdown in consensus politics accompanying post-Fordist structural transformations. In the resulting mainstream conspiracy culture, rather than a minority group threatening the normative social order, it is the social order itself (generally embodied by the government or some aspect of it) that threatens the well-being of citizens generally.(18) In other words, if the previous paradigm of conspiracy was The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the new model is The X Files.

Algerian politics, however, does not so easily mimic its American counterpart. For one thing, the Algerian State has consistently utilized conspiracy theories to underwrite its authority. During the 1954-62 war of independence, for example, the revolutionary National Liberation Front (FLN) accused its various rivals, including certain urban economic elites, emigrant reformers, ethnic minorities and rival political parties, of being traitors (*harkis*)--colonial enemies within. However, except perhaps for a brief, 20-year period between the late 1950s and late 1970s, it would be difficult to isolate a moment of national consensus in which paranoid thought was directed primarily at internal minorities. Indeed, Algerians have generally regarded the central state itself as suspect, realizing soon after independence that the party elite had merely stepped into the positions of power left vacant by the colonial officials. While Algeria's post-independence hydrocarbon boom, successful agrarian reform and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement produced a degree of political pride, such a national consciousness proved to be quite tenuous given the country's radical decline in economic and political prosperity in the mid-1970s. By the 1980s, an increasing number of Algerians were no longer simply suspicious of the government's motives, but had also become convinced that it was working against them.(19)

Algeria's current civil war has only exacerbated the climate of political mistrust that nurture conspiracy theories. The 1988 student demonstrations in Algiers signaled the transition from the generation who fought in the war for

independence (and for whom the FLN represented Algeria), to one that came of age in a post-war period of increasing economic and social insecurity. The military crackdown on the demonstrations and the subsequent declaration of martial law in 1992 served to reinforce for this younger generation the perceived identity between a corrupt FLN government (decried as apparatchiks), and a repressive military. Given this assumed congruence, it is little wonder that young Algerians now hold the government--multiparty or not--as primarily responsible for the last eight years of bloodshed, regardless of the fact that the international media has attributed most of the violence to Islamist para-military groups.

In part, this "plague of paranoia" can be attributed to the hazy character of the war's events and participants. The tactics and appearances of both military and Islamist forces have been strikingly similar. Military personnel in urban areas, known popularly as "ninjas," mask themselves in order to hide their identities and prevent reprisals. While presenting their actions as police (rather than military) procedures, their conduct does not comply with legal scrutiny. For instance, no "terrorist" has ever been publicly tried.⁽²⁰⁾ Meanwhile, the Islamist militias tend to act like state forces, dressing up in military garb, stopping cars at "false" roadblocks, searching the vehicles and demanding the occupants' identification papers. Before the violence began in 1992, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had actually taken over a number of governmental roles, providing working-class neighborhoods like Bab El-Oued with local policing, affordable markets and a de facto welfare system.

Both the military and the Islamist militants also rely on similar narratives of authority. Each traces their genealogy to the revolutionary maquis who battled the French colonial forces during the war of independence.⁽²¹⁾ While the military can trace these ties bureaucratically--in that the FLN party structure and leadership remains largely intact (the recently-elected president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, for instance, was foreign minister during the 1965-79 Boumedienne regime)--the Islamists can do so ideologically, claiming to represent an unfinished jihad against economic and cultural (read: Western Christian) colonialism. Likewise, each seeks to undermine the other's fictive lineage strategies with similar accusations of external origins. While the Islamists accuse Algeria's bureaucratic and intellectual elites of constituting a *hizb fransa* (or "French party") and further, of being toadies to the IMF and the World Bank, those so accused treat the Islamists (whose leaders they call "Afghanis") as agents of a global terrorist network stretching from Bosnia to Sudan to Afghanistan and financed by petro-dollars from the Gulf. Invoking conspiracy narratives in the process of out-legitimation encourages the vernacular circulation of countless other such theories that undermine and blur official media presentations of the war. While some of these attempt to trace the Islamist groups to the agendas of France and/or the United States, viewing the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as a creation of the American CIA or the French GIGN in an effort to de-stabilize the Algerian state, others point the finger directly at the military, emphasizing that the latter has benefited from the civil war. They question how, in spite of heavy military presence and frequent claims of government victories, Islamist militants continue to operate with near impunity, perform sensational attacks in close proximity to military and police bases, and yet manage to flee without any casualties.⁽²²⁾ They wonder why no prominent government or military figure (with the exception of the liberalizing interim president Mohammed Boudiaf) has been

killed during the conflict--why the assassinations have targeted the foreign and intellectual middle class rather than those in power. Others go further, interjecting into the on-going debate over "*Qui tue?*" a sense of certainty about the military's creation and direct operation of the GIA, either (as alternate theories attest) as a means to discredit more mainstream Islamist parties (e.g., the FIS), or to maintain the state of emergency required to legitimate military rule on the international scene.(23) According to one theory particularly popular in expatriate circles, the military actually orchestrated recent village massacres, not simply to create a climate of fear, but to clear private landowners from the fertile lands in the Blida and Medea regions south of Algiers.(24)

Such conspiracy theories operate by highlighting certain truisms--that the government and the military are closely related, or that the military benefits from a state of war--and then takes them to their logical extreme: The Algerian government is killing its own citizens. This "paranoia," rather than representing an irrational pathology, instead bespeaks a particularly savvy understanding of the intimate relationship between truth and power in Algerian society. Proponents of conspiracy tend to take such a Foucauldian insight to an absolute end, however: If knowledge and power are linked, then access to knowledge confers power, and thus power tends to protect "true" knowledge. In the absence of other flows of information, such conspiracy thinking itself ironically takes on the characteristics of a new "regime of truth" possessing its own discursive rules, institutions, political economic stakes, diffusion networks and ideological struggles.(25) In this sense, conspiracy theorizing can be viewed as a powerful, counter-hegemonic communicative practice for the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge in and about Algeria.

Transnational Circulation, State Power

Before concluding, it is instructive to highlight two aspects of this communicative practice that limit its functioning as a counter-hegemonic truth regime in contemporary Algeria. First, conspiracy theorists have little or no access to the national or private media in a country where even cellular phones are forbidden to all but the highest state officials and where outspoken critics of the government are routinely censored and imprisoned. Given such pronounced surveillance, conspiracy theories proliferate and circulate primarily through the various media of the Algerian diaspora, from low-budget newspapers and radio stations to various Internet list-serves.(26) With their centers of production in Paris, London and Montreal, these alternate media maintain networks of close, informal contacts (primarily consisting of friends and family) in Algeria, and are thus able to bypass official information channels. Such reports are often subsequently picked up by French or American newspapers or television, and are then circulated back to Algeria via satellite links.(27) For instance, during the 1988 riots in Algiers, the sole source of news coverage on either side of the Mediterranean was Radio-Beur, a Paris-based immigrant radio station that received telephone reports from witnesses and participants in Algiers, and then re-transmitted them via satellite to Algerian listeners throughout France and Algeria.(28) In this sense, conspiracy theorizing, as vernacular knowledge production, tends to foster a transnational, rather than simply a national, imagination, and thus operates in a parallel, rather than oppositional, fashion to the official truth regime.

Secondly, contemporary Algerian conspiracy theories, while severely critical of the state's role in the civil war,

paradoxically reinforce state power. Alleging that the military government is "pulling the strings of the war" fosters the belief that the military remains the sole, true power base in Algeria, regardless of the religious and ethnic challenges levied against it. As such, whether understood as the lone hope against fundamentalism and anarchy or as the actual instigator of the civil war, the military regime can present itself as a viable international actor with a monopoly on legitimate violence.⁽²⁹⁾ Seen from this admittedly conspiratorial point of view, the Algerian state can deploy those conspiracy theories against itself to underwrite its own truth regime and thereby increase internal militarization and surveillance. So, once again, conspiracy theories become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Conspiracy narratives in Algeria should not be viewed as merely functional responses to the instability of the Algerian civil war, but rather as constituting a potent ingredient of the conflict itself. Neither necessarily hegemonic nor counter-hegemonic, conspiracy represents a modality of vernacular knowledge production that confers power on the accuser and the accused simultaneously. If scholars scorn conspiracy as a mode of explanation, they do so not out of an exaggerated commitment to scientific rationality, but because it threatens their ascribed roles as distant observers and critics. When truth is power, we all become responsible agents in the violence that surrounds us, and the Ivory Tower comes crashing down.

Endnotes

- (1) Jerry Fletcher (Mel Gibson) in *Conspiracy Theory* (dir. Richard Donner, 1997).
- (2) Henri Zuiker, "The Conspiratorial Imperative: Medieval Jewry in Western Europe," in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*. Carl F. Graumann and Serve Moscovici, eds. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), pp. 87-103.
- (3) Peter Knight, "A 'Plague of Paranoia': Theories of Conspiracy Theory since the 1960s," in *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*. Nancy Lusignan Schultz, ed. (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999), pp. 23-50.
- (4) Jean-Noel Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations and Images* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1990).
- (5) Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).
- (6) E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Jean and John Comaroff, "Introduction," in *Modernity and its Malcontents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- (7) Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1987).
- (8) Kathleen Stewart, "Conspiracy Theory's Worlds," in *Paranoia Within Reason: Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, George E. Marcus, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 12-19.
- (9) S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
- (10) Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism*

and the Interpretation of Culture, Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 355.

(11) Zuiker, op. cit., p. 90.

(12) Knight, op. cit., p. 36.

(13) Hence the observed "feedback loop" and "self-fulfilling prophecy" characteristics of conspiracy theories, whereby states, assuming popular mistrust, proceed to conduct in secret, "black budget" operations to achieve political ends (Knight, op.cit, p. 32). Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum brilliantly satirizes this process.

(14) Richard O. Curry and Thomas M. Brown, eds., Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972); Richard Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays (New York: Knopf, 1965); George Johnson, The Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983); and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

(15) Johnson, op.cit., p. 12.

(16) George E. Marcus, "Introduction: The Paranoid Style Now," in George E. Marcus, ed., Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 1-11.

(17) Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, "Preface," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds., Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), pp. vii-ix.

(18) Knight., op. cit., pp. 29-32.

(19) Several scholars have noted this trend. See Ali El-Kenz, "The End of Populism," in Algerian Reflections on Arab Crises (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1991), pp. 33-47; and Kamel Rarrbo, L'Algerie et sa jeunesse. Marginalisations sociales et desarroi culturel (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), pp. 80-82.

(20) The official press usually claims no survivors in raids on Islamist camps.

(21) Benjamin Stora, L'Algerie en 1995: La guerre, l'histoire, la politique (Paris: Editions Michalon, 1995).

(22) See Pierre Sane, "Algerie: Qui profite de cette situation?," Liberation, (May 7, 1997); and Jose Garcon, "Terreur et psychose aux portes d'Alger," Liberation, (September 8, 1997).

(23) Larbi Ait-Hanlouta, "L'Opacite du Drame Algerien," in Le Monde Libertaire 1098 (October 30-November 5, 1997).

(24) See Patrick Forestier, "Algerie: derriere les tueries, de sordides interets immobiliers et financiers?," Paris Match, (October 9, 1997); and John Sweeny, "Denunciation of the Role of the Police in the Massacres of Algerians," The Observer (London), (January 11, 1998). This same theory has also been cited by Louisa Hanoune, president of the Trotskyist Algerian Workers' Party, in an interview with Frankfurter Rundschau (February 16, 1998), with the additional claim that the responsible Algerian generals were operating under orders from the International Monetary Fund. These theories have been highlighted on the overseas Internet sites of Algeria-Watch (www.algeria-watch.de), Hijra

International (home.worldcom.ch.:80/~hijra), and the Free Algerian Officers Movement (www.anp.org -- based in Madrid), and have been circulated through the US-based e-mail list-serves of Algeria-Net and Amazigh-Net.

(25) Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 131-32.

(26) Scholars have recently noted how the Internet has facilitated self-publishing, the accumulation of information, and the informal (and near anonymous) communication which mark conspiracy theory production and circulation (cf. Knight, op. cit.; "L'Algerie et l'Internet," *Libre Algerie* (January 17, 2000)).

(27) Satellite television has fostered a particular transnational imagination, as parabolic dishes in Algeria point to France, and those owned by immigrants in France point to Algeria.

(28) *Radio-Beur, Octobre a Alger* (Paris: Editions Sans-Frontieres, 1989).

(29) Deborah Harrold, "Liberalization During Wartime: Situations and Strategies Center Around and Away from the State" (Paper presented at the University of Chicago/NYU Graduate Symposium on Citizenship in the Middle East and South Asia, New York, May 1998).

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