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**TRUTHERS: THE 911 TRUTH MOVEMENT AND THE CULTURE OF CONSPIRACY**

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1. Introduction: Controlled demolition

There are people who believe that the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on September 11th 2001 was not caused by crashing of hijacked airplanes into the buildings and the resulting fires. They believe that the two towers were destroyed by explosives planted in the buildings. The explosives, a ‘controlled demolition’, were planted on orders by covert circles within the US neoconservative, military national security ‘community’ within the United States government. The hijackings, whether they were faked or staged, and the resulting crashes and building collapses, were all planned and used as a pretext to expand American power, to invade the Middle East and obtain its oil, along with suppressing dissent at home.

In addition to the collapse of the World Trade Center and a third building, Building7, not being caused by the planes, these groups also believe that a passenger plane did not crash into the Pentagon, that it was a missile or spy plane directed by the U.S. military; finally, these groups assert that the fourth hijacked plane in western Pennsylvania did not crash due to a struggle between heroic passengers and the hijackers, but was instead diverted or forced down by a U.S. fighter jet; that passengers some disappeared, or were executed. Because the September 11th events were an “inside job”, it follows that the Bin Ladin videos claiming responsibility are false, that the planes were purposely not intercepted, that the cell phone calls from the planes were falsified (through ‘voice morphing’), and that the 19 hijackers do not exist. Needless to say, these groups consider the subsequent 911 Commission report to be a whitewash, or cover-up. The 911 disaster, according to this theory, was a classic “false flag” operation a simulated attack meant to obtain popular support for an aggressive war (parallels here are drawn to the Gulf of Tonkin, The Maine, and the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor, which Roosevelt supposedly knew about.) Similarly, George Bush knew what was going on, but was assisted or insulated by a small coterie of neoconservatives and military operatives led by Cheyney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Pearle, assisted by various intelligence and security specialists, possibly including Israel’s Mossad. In short, 911 was a a diaboloical American ploy to spread American empire in the world. Exposing this plot is to expose the true story of 911. It is nothing short of bringing down evil.

The people in this movement, and that is what they call themselves, communicate on the Internet, produce videos to be shown at public meetings, exchange new research facts to validate their claims, hold street corner exhibitions or demonstrations on the 11th of each month, stand at the WTC every Saturday, participate in professional meetings of architects and engineers, and organize conferences to join together with like-minded anti-establishment types. Well aware that they are a minority, they attempt to convert others who are seeking the full story behind the 911 tragedy. They debate with skeptics and bring up anomalies, such as the lack of airplane interceptions or the collapse of Building 7, which was not hit by a plane who reject their claims. Most importantly, they seek to get into alternative or ‘mainstream media’ so as to convert others in the search for the truth about 911. For this group, the ultimate truth is that George Bush, or people near to him, were involved in and directly responsible for the murder of 3000 Americans on September 11th . This movement, called the 911 truth movement, is literally trying to speak truth to power. They call themselves 911 truth activists or “truthers”. Truthers contest what they call “the official conspiracy theory”, “19 Arabs with box knives directed by a guy on a dialysis machine in a cave in Afghanistan’. They attempt to show to potential converts the inconsistencies in the government’s explanation of the evenets, and the ‘smoking guns’ of government involvement. The size of this movement is difficult to estimate. There are small groups in every major American city. Like most internet movements, or movements in general, there is a small core of dedicated activists, a group of supporters, and a peripheral group of passive adherents who click in once in a while or subscribe to a an email list. Most of their labour is voluntary and their major expenses of running a website or holding meetings come from a few private donors (including celebrities) and sales of truther videos or admission to meetings. Public meetings and demonstrations number at most, in the hundreds. Site statistics measuring hits are less reliable, as are downloads.

The truthers’ message, despite its fringe character, does not go unopposed. On the net, in chatrooms, on TV and at occasional meetings, truthers are also attacked by those who point out the implausibility or distortion of their claims. The truthers refer to these people derisively as ‘debunkers’. While truthers are trying to convert those who don’t know, and arguing with the debunkers, they are also looking for provocateurs or even ‘saboteurs’ who would divide them; these people are accused of spreading even more outlandish claims, thus discrediting the movement in the eyes of the public (that there were no planes at all hitting the WTC, or that there were laser beams from outer space, or more overt anti-Semitic sites).

Conspiratorial thinking about 911 – here understood as a plot hatched in Washington by a covert group, and not by bin Laden – is common in the Arab World and has been given most publicity by the Iranian president and in various Arab media. Similarly, certain Russian media outlets find the 911conspiracy scenarios legitimate news, and activists frequently appear on ‘Russia Today’. Yet as a movement, the 911 truth movement, is largely American, with branches in several West European countries. Its adherents come largely from the political left, but there are also extreme right-wing elements opposed to the New World Order, global elites in fnance or oil, as well as overtly anti-Semitic elements. The 911 truth movement has its gurus, its internal schisms, and its factions. It has debates about “why the media fears us” and believes that “the truth is on our side”. From late 2006, I have been closely following the movement, and especially its progress in Denmark, where I live. I have read hundreds of pages of websites from the U.S. movement, most of them available via [www.911truth.org](http://www.911truth.org), followed several web forums and e-mail lists, seen hours of video presentations and video lectures, and I have attended 911 meetings and demonstrations in Copenhagen, largely listening to groups of activists discuss facts and interpretations about collapsing buildings and strategy about how to get their message to the public. I have tried to keep a low profile, though it turned out that a Copenhagen newspaper ended up taking my photo and quoting me after one of these meetings. I have since written an article about the Danish truthers in another newspaper and participated in some forums clarifying facts about activities or participants in the movement, including translation of some Danish materials for a wider audience. My continual appearance at Danish 911 truther gatherings is met by hostility from some participants, who want to know if I am a journalist and why I am always writing things down in that yellow notebook; for others may appearance is a familiar friendliness and I am even approached if I might not like to debate with them one day, or whether I have come around to their side, or even, if I could arrange a meeting at my home university of Lund, in Sweden. The truther community in Copenhagen is a small one, a dozen or so, and they come together on the net and at meetings. Parts of their forum, which contains 500 Danes who have given their name and photo saying they want a new inquiry about 911, are closed to all those who do not sign this statement (which I have not). This poses obvious methodological challenges.

This paper represents a work in process . My interest lies in two areas; first, how do conspiracy theories take on a life? Here I will argue that they do so by invoking a hyperrationality in the search for evidence –connecting the dots— so that participants an obtain a place in history. Second, how do movements get started and sustain themselves in the internet age? Are the truthers just another cult? Or is there something else going on that requires from us new theoretical tools. I have also had to confront certain broader issues about what the truthers believe and the limits of my understanding, or tolerance, for their beliefs. At a time and in an environment where irrationality, obscurantism, oversimplification, and dumbing down are ever more present, (racism, creationism, healing quackery, cults, etc.), where people can be manipulated by those propagating seemingly innocent or alternative beliefs, no matter how outlandish, and where increasing numbers of people would rather surf and read, where do we anthropologists draw that relativist line? Is it enough to find explanations for why seemingly smart, intelligent, normally functioning people can believe totally implausible things? Should we regard 911 truth as just an alternative cosmology? An alternative form of social understanding like, say witchcraft or Celtic paganism, and leave it at that? Or should we also go a step further and do what we can to combat it in the name of science and reason? To put it more simply, is 911 conspiracy thinking simply interesting or exotic? Or is it dangeroius, in the same way that Holocaust Denial is dangerous? Finally, there is also a methodological issue of how we research non-territorial communities which are widespread and far away, an issue familiar to many anthropologists in these multisited fieldwork era.

2. Studying conspiracism

There is a wide literature on conspiracy theories, especially on ‘what they mean’. In anthropology, there is the 1999 collection edited by Marcus, ‘Paranoia with Reason’. It is a typical collection insofar as scholars use conspiratorial thinking – or similar thinking about hidden powers over social life, as a window for something else. Much of this literature falls into the area of cultural studies, a description of a cultural product and an explication of its coherence; studies, of say, why we are attracted to X-files or why believers in alien abductions may in fact feel empowered. In this paper, I am concerned not so much with conspiratorial thinking as with conspiracist practice. And one may go back to Richard Hofstadter’s famous essay, from 1952, ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics,’ for some hints that conspiratorial thinking is peculiarly American. Unfortunately, we know that such styles are quite common in other parts of the world, including Stalinist Russia, or as Richard Pipes has written so widely on, in the Middle East. I say this because we need to find a method to place conspiratorial thinking in the context of conspiritorial social practices.

Research on conspiracism tends to center around four approaches. One tradition looks at conspiratorial thinking as such. What are the properties of a conspiratorial world view? What is the logic behind conspiracy thinking in which there are convoluted plots, secret groups, and malevolent power. How do these people see the world? What kind of language, the representation, the logic or emotional triggers operate rhetoric. The purpose here is not to disprove conspiratorial thinking, because the nature of such beliefs, while ostensibly based on evidence, logic and reason, is religious: they cannot be disproven by logic. The task here is why certain ways of thinking have a certain appeal, substituting for religion, a cosmology. They give meaning. In anthropology the study of witchcraft or other worldviews might be similar. A Norwegian volume on conspiracy theory is written by sociologists of relgion and is called ‘Conspiranoia’

A second set of studies looks at the vulnerable individual; they ask, ‘Who is susceptible for conspiratorial explanationss?’ What kind of people need closed systems where there is no room for chance, coincidence or judgements. Such people might be analyzed in psychological terms as an example of the ‘true believer’ (Eric Hoffer) or ‘the convert’ who suddenly sees the light and acquires a missionary project of some kind –political, religious, countercultural. We might look at such people, seeing them as vulnerable, or suddenly empowered, reformulating their life project in which ‘everything becomes clear’. The sociologist Francesco Alberoni describes such people in a ‘nascent state’ in which emotional communities join forces with an intellectual project. They act to convert others thru talk and friendship, and to create a group with high internal solidarity and a paranoia toward outsiders which at worst can lead to a suicide cult. 911 truth, not being a residential community, is far from such cult, although individual activists might be described in these terms. In social psychology Festinger’s analysis of cognitive dissonance in ‘When Prophecy Fails’ is relevant here

A third approach is to focus on the social mechanisms which sustain such beliefs, to see beliefs as attached to group or community practice. Research into cults commonly uses such an approach looking at individual submission to the group, of unanimity without coercion. Various fundamentalist groups and sects are commonly explained this way.

Finally, a fourth approach views conspiracy theory as a sign of the times, as an artifact of a certain postmodern age in which signals, signs, identities, images, narratives, and hidden power all come together; conspiracy thinking is a marker of political disaffection, or perhaps even a kind of intellectual entertainment, something that people play with. Several recent volumes on conspiracy thinking, looking at it as literary or cultural approaches, fall in this genre.

Now these approaches are useful, **b**ut they run into a problem with groups such as 911 truth. For the truthers are not a cult in the sense that they live and interact with each other. They have largely an online presence. They are united around a certain issue but often live far apart, meeting at only certain events. 11th of the month.

Also, their members are otherwise well functioning members of society with jobs, studies, articulate users of the net, and applying their talents to learning new knowledge in studying how buildings collapse or how planes fly. 911 truthers gather and disseminate forensic evidence. They read, discuss, recapitulate, explain, test each other’s theories, they are even familiar with conspiracy thinking such as Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance.

Here I will try to join the three approaches in order to test how they apply to 911 truth. I will attempt to do this, by first talking about conspiratorial thinking, including 911 conspiratorial thinking, and then discuss the social movement which is 911 truth. And again, since time is short, I will leave open the problem of whether we should allow irrational, alternative understandings of the world, which focus our political attention on certain actors who are manifestly innocent, to lie on the altar of cultural relativism, or whether we should be doing something about this, as much as anthropologists do something about other practices we don’t like.

3. What is a conspiracy?

A conspiracy is a group of people who join together in secret to commit an illegal act, such as robbing a bank. A conspiracy theory applies to conspiracies, but the conspiracies are of a qualitatively different order. Conspiracy theories are narratives of illegitimate power. The actors in the conspiracy are a small, secretive group, they are pervasive, if not worldwide, and they are unscrupulous in their project. Conspiracies of secretive groups exist in reality, of course, but in a conspiracy theory, the groups do not stop at one specific goal, taking over the American Anthropological Association, but some kind of larger world domination. Hence, they are everywhere, and so omnipotent and sophisticated that they can also plant counter information or neutralize inquiry. Conspiracies of this kind are total agency and total structure: they act anywhere and everywhere, and they include everything. Most especially, they include control over knowledge (truth) and dissemination of knowledge, what we today might call media. The conspirators are not simply actors, they are also trying to penetrate the way we think, our humanity.

For someone who believes that world events are dominated by a tightly knit, secretive group, a conspiratorial practice involves two things: first, deciphering clues, linking together disparate enigmas into a single framework, and showing that the framework leads to the ultimate diabolical actor, the demonic power; second, waking people up, spreading the message, making sure people understand the urgency of the situation, the ‘mission’.

It is not hard to explain why conspiracy thinking and practice are attractive. Theories of witchcraft and sorcery deal with illegitimate power at a local, community level. At a larger level, a more diabolical conspiracy can explain extraordinary, unfortunate events, most especially those in which we feel shocked, disempowered or vulnerable: assassination of our leader, a sudden disaster, an epidemic disease, the destruction of the World Trade Center. If ordinary reason asks, ‘how did this happen?’ conspiracy theorists as, ‘who did this to us?’ Insofar as conspiricism attempts to construct a diabolical ‘them’ to which ‘we’ must give combat, a them who must be ‘discovered’ through ‘research’ and ‘connecting the dots’, ‘conspiracy practice is yet another form of ‘community-building’

Conspiracy thinking has heroes and villains. Heroes are those who uncover or expose the truth, and who stubbornly refuse to be silenced. Villains are those who will use any means to achieve world domination. In between are the dupes, the skeptics and the unbelievers.

Karl Popper has argued that conspiratorial thinking has its origins in secularism, with the death of God. Prior to the Enlightenment, explanations for all social phenomena could be attributed to the work of God or the work of Satan. With the Enlightenment, with Reason, comes the need for other all-encompassing explanations, but the villains must be found here on earth. Therefore the blaming of Jews, Freemasons, Illuminati, Bolsheviks, international bankers, mafia, aliens and neocons to account for a whole variety of phenomena, including diseases, accidents, coincidences, and disasters like 911.

That such groups can wield power and influence is indisputable. That they are so consolidated as to achieve world domination is ludicrous. The Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Mafia, and others may exert influence, they may often have the ear of the powerful, but they struggle against a host of other organizations. It is, for example, difficult to construct a conspiracy scenario to explain the way the U.S. went into and got out of Iraq, the current economic crisis, or the ongoing difficulties in Afghanistan.

Conspiracy theory is not just a way of thinking, it is also a practice, it is a practice based on the detailed analysis of clues, on debate and interpretation, one might say over-interpretation. As such, it requires communication between the detectives. Here the internet, ‘itself a vast conspiracy’ as Kathleen Stewart argued, is perfect. Fragmented messages and facts, cut and pasted out of their original context, these fragments float around in cyberspace and obtain new ‘tags’. Different groups, anti-Bush leftists, 911 skeptics, or holocaust deniers can all take these ‘data’ and reorder or reinterpret them.. Fear of a new world order unites them, and the many user groups on the net now reinforce their thinking by closing off their forums to anyone who does not support them, and banning those who might argue against them.

Enter 911, a tragic disaster of epic proportions, the collapse of the buildings shown repeatedly on television. And with thousands of fragments of information which can be interpreted and reinterpreted within a myriad of frameworks. Faced with such a disaster, Americans who are raised with the idea of efficient systems and mastery over disaster ask the obvious questions: how did the hijackers get on the planes? How did they take over the cockpits? Why weren’t they intercepted? How were flight school dropouts able to fly planes? Why did the towers collapse so fast? Where is the wreckage at the Pentagon? Why are some names not on the passenger lists? How could such an improbable event have happened? To answer these questions with, ‘It was an unfortunate chain of coincidences,’ ‘It just happened’. Or ‘We don’t know’, is certainly unfulfilling in a world of uncertainty and insecurity.

The truthers have an answer. It is an answer far beyond the official explanation “the official conspiracy theory” that focus on 19 fanatic Muslims, a suicide terrorist plot, and an incompetent air defense system taking over four planes. It is instead an alternative theory that the planes were auto piloted into the buildings, and the buildings were demolished through a controlled demolition; that no plane hit the pentagon; that that flight 93 was shot down by our own people to prevent the conspiracy from coming to light. The missing data, the enigma of Bush reading to children while thousands of people burn to death, the sudden exposure just one day later of details about the 19 hijackers, all of this is part of a sophisticated plot. The purpose: to pave the way for American military adventures in the Middle East, to secure middle eastern oil, to invade Afghanistan, Iraq and eventually other countries. The culprits: a small group of neo conservatives in the government and affiliated think tanks and military-security organs who seek American domination. The victims: innocent Muslims and 3000 murdered Americans. It only remains to connect more dots, and to get the message out, and truth will triumph.

Examining the 911 Truth movement, we have what might be called a classic conspiracy theory. Like other groups who try to explain assassinations, disasters or surprise attacks, 911 truth takes its point of departure in a specific, violent and shocking event which exposes our deepest invulnerability. Unlike the traditional conspiracy theories of the anti-Semitic/Illuminati/Freemason variety, which thrive only on anxieties and prejudice, these modern conspiracy theorists thrive on a proliferation of information. The Kennedy assignation, the Olaf Palme murder, Princess Diana, and now 911 all have masses of forensic evidence, witness testimony, preliminary inquiries and government reports. These data can be interpreted, analyzed and reanalyzed in order to discover and explain how specific events happened and to find those complicit in the inevitable cover up. Modern conspiracy theory is now accompanied by a transparency of data. The more data released by the government, or the pentagon, the more interpretation that the conspiracists need.

Now these data, or their interpretations now circulate and re-circulate on the web, and therefore easily retrieved whenever needed, even after being disproved. This means that those who try to debunk the controlled demolition conspiracy must be constantly on guard keep up with continually relaunched conspiracy theory.

In contrast to the older conspiracy theories which sought out facts to prove a preconceived demonic evil, modern conspiracy theory is thus more sophisticated and scientific. It is about searching for further facts, making links. The “research” that 911 truthers carry out is internet research. It is about googling, searching and clicking, pasting and then posting it on like-minded forums. Like all conspiracy, 911 conspiracy theory is about finding the evil forces, the small nefarious group deep within our political body, explicating their octopus network of contacts and control (a security company for the WTC, for example, had George Bush’s cousin Marvin Bush on its board). It is about a belief that the evildoers, the neoconservatives and their henchmen in the government, military, intelligence services and think tanks, are so efficient that they can hijack planes, plant explosives, falsify clues, create diversions, remove incriminating evidence, and then intimidate us into believing the false story. In the 911 truth scenario, these evil forces not only carry out evil acts, they also control our thinking through the media so that the true message never reaches the masses.

911 thinking resembles modern day American populist thinking about thought control perpetuated by elites: ‘Small groups in Washington’, ‘control over media’, ‘pulling something over on us’, are common themes in populist rhetoric. That the financial elite could sacrifice their own by blowing up the World Trade Center makes their plot even more diabolical.

4. Conspiracy practice

Conspiracy theory generates a conspiratorial practice. To pursue conspiracy practice involves constant inquiry and analysis of detailed evidence, efforts to refute contradictory evidence, the distribution of new data to fellow activists, websites and e-mail groups, the recruiting new members and converts, and excluding those skeptics or diversionists who would disrupt or derail the movement.

If all this sounds familiar, it is. The truthers conform to this general model of a millennial cult, and in this sense we would call them uninteresting. They are community, and they are also believers. They have this love-hate relationship with the outside world, who they want to convert, but who they also fear. They have tests of loyalty, and schisms, and their leaders are intellectually gifted, technical skilled and at times charismatic. Like other such cults of true believers, from the anti-UN Right (New World Order, Black-Ops) to the extreme anti-Bush Left, the 911 truthers possess all the characteristics of millennial groups outlined by Eric Hoffer, Arthur Koestler, Francesco Alberoni or Leon Festinger.

Yet there seems to be something else going on here which merits some inquiry into their organization, motives, and impact. Due to their on-line presence and the spectacular nature of their claims, due to the very nature of 911 as a national disaster viewed by everyone on their TV sets, and due to the nature of their accusations which began with a Administration, the 911 truth movement has achieved a certain resonance in American society, and even abroad. The “mainstream media” as they call it, periodically covers the truthers, even if it is only for their entertainment value or as a foil to their views (Fox News has had the “Scholars for 911 Truth” for several appearances). Every European country has a 911 Truth group, and some link up to British 7/7 groups. Key texts of the 911 truth movement have now been translated. And gurus of the movement have emerged: the theologists David Ray Griffin, the physicist Steven Jones, the architect Richard Gage, the philosopher of science Jim Fetzer, and in Copenhagen a chemist named Niels Harrit, who claims to have discovered the explosive which brought down the world trade center, something called nanothermite. With internet presence and visits to several countries, 911 truth has a resonance beyond that of an isolated cult; they are now even parodied in Rolling Stone and South Park.

There is another feature of the 911 Truth movement that seems to give it a legitimacy far greater than that other great conspiracy theory of the 20th century, the Kennedy Assassination. In its effort to “find out the truth” about 911, to let us know “the full story”, it can appeal to legitimate critics of U.S. foreign policy, to family members of those killed in the attacks, and to others who may criticize the U.S. government for not fully explaining how the attacks could have happened, why warnings were not taken seriously by authorities, how the hijackers could have entered the United States or got onto the airplanes, or why the attacks were not prevented. These people are not bonafide “truthers”, but they are also seeking the truth about 911. The truthers clear intention is to raise certain questions so that people can be led toward a more radical understanding, that it was elements within the United States government, not 19 hijackers armed with box cutters, who either allowed or knowingly murdered 3000 persons. Understanding why the towers collapsed so quickly should lead converts to understand that it was because the government planted explosives to blow them up. The 911truthers thus have a dual agenda: the innocuous one of “seeking the full truth” about the events of September 11th, something which the families of victims and all Americans naturally want; and the more radical one of demonstrating what they already purport to know: that evildoers within the government murdered U.S. citizens on purpose, that “911 was an inside job”.

5. The basis of 911 beliefs

Is ‘911 truth’ a movement, or just a cult? Francesco Alberoni has argued that a movement is simply a cult that makes history; that is, that the cult, with its core of believers, can attract others who join not because they are converts, but because they have strategic interests. Hence, in 1917, the peasants could join with the Bolsheviks to overthrow the tsar, but not because they were convinced of the validity of class struggle. Perhaps 911 is also at the threshold of both cult-like and movement-like behavior.

Unlike more outlandish cult groups, the truthers are correct in understanding that 911 was a complex event that generated many unanswered questions. Without doubt, they are correct that there are events that occurred on 911 about which we do not have full explanations, e.g., why a 110 story skyscraper should fall so fast, why the planes were not intercepted, or why George Bush kept reading to the schoolchildren; We can also acknowledge that the U.S. administration has used, or exploited, the 911 attack as a basis to reformulate its foreign policy and conduct military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to enact new laws limiting rights of certain citizens. True, we do not know “the full story”. But the absence of a “full story” is true for every historical event, since they are subject to new interpretations. And the observation that even tragedies produce beneficiaries is not the same as saying that they planned it.

Truthers contest the conventional explanation of 911, what they call the “official conspiracy theory” of 19 Arab hijackers directed by Bin Laden, and the incompetence of government organs in not being able to read forewarnings of the attacks, catch the hijackers or intercept the planes (truthers call this the “incompetence theory”).

My goal is to try and enter the world of the 911 truthers. To do this I need not agree with them, nor do I need to feel sorry for them. Rather, we need to understand their world. Perhaps we can then understand why higher education and the latest information technology do not necessarily promote truth and reason, but isolation and obscurantism. In this sense, the 911 truthers are the mirror image of the home grown terrorists: in our very midst are people who see the world in a radically different way than ourselves.

6. The world of 911 truth

Three threads link the 911 events and conspiracy. One is the event itself, the catastrophic and visible murder of thousands of citizens in a major city, all on the TV screen. Unlike, say, holocaust deniers, it is not about gas chambers which no one had ever seen and which existed decades earlier in isolated towns far away. The 911 events happened before our eyes. As so many witnesses stated, ‘It was like a movie’. And they were still “unbelievable”.

The second thread is the U.S. government’s explanation of the conspiracy, as the work of 19 Arab suicide bombers armed with box-cutting knives. The rapidity of the information provided by the government and the news media, including information that later turned out to be false, was enough to lend credence to the wildest of theories. For all this information had to be interpreted in a specific political climate of a divided America, and later on, of an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq. In this light, it becomes easy to assume that Bush and his cronies were up to something and that 911 was a terrifying example.

Finally, as in any major disaster, the abundance of information, impressions and witness accounts come together with gaps and missing information. For example, there is no video of the plane crashing into the Pentagon, of if there is, the Pentagon has yet to release it. We do not exactly know why the hijacked planes could not be intercepted, short of gross incompetence or conflicts among our own security agencies,

The event, the government explanation, and the combination of abundant and missing information all led to the birth of conspiracy theories from Day 1.One of the earliest conspiracies, for example, concerned the old staple of conspiracy, the Jews. Israeli embassy statements saying that there were 4000 Israeli citizens in the New York area led to conjectures in the Arab press that Jews working in the WTC had received an SMS message not to come to work that day. The conclusion was that the Mossad had some hand in the events. ([www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org) [<http://www.adl.org/>](http://www.adl.org/)). Today, holocaust deniers and anti-Semites are also part of the 911theory landscape, much to the irritation of 911 truthers. 911 truth sites regular quote journalistic reports carried out by holocaust-denial websites.

By 2002, the lack of data from the Pentagon had led the French leftist author Thierry Meyssan to publish a book asserting that no plane hit the Pentagon. The American 911 movement emerged out of some conferences held in San Francisco, and then takes its message to university campuses thanks to the enthusiasm of certain early activists such as James Fetzer and Kevin Barrett. Barrett, a historian and folklorist teaching in Wisconsin, is married to a Moroccan woman and has converted to Islam. Fetzer, a philosophy professor, who had written an earlier book stating that the Zapruder film had been doctored, set up the 911truth.org and founded the Scholars for 911 Truth, lending an academic aura to the movement. Barrett, having lost his instructor’s job at Wisconsin after teaching about 911 truth, is now active at the Muslim-Jewish-Christian Alliance for 911 truth.

By end 2003 911 truth had obtained some founding texts, not only that of Thierry Meyssan, but also Steven Jones explanation of the towers’ collapse as a controlled demolition (Jones, a physicist at BYU, was quickly pensioned off). Most importantly, however was */The New Pearl Harbor/*, by David Ray Griffin. Griffin, a professor emeritus of theology at Sonoma State University, and expert on process theology and theories of evil. Griffin has published 8 books on the 911 conspiracy and is a frequent keynote speaker at 911 events (though he is currently hospitalized with back problems) Griffin gathered up 911 research and publicized a list of 40 smoking gun questions which he feels remain unanswered in the official 911 explanations and government reports. The list is available on several websites, along with numerous other enigmas. The most frequently cited enigmas and the 911 movement’s answers to them.

1. How did the planes succeed in reaching their targets without being intercepted?

2. Why did the two towers collapse so fast?

3. Why did Tower 7 collapse even though it was not hit.

4. Why is there no video of the plane hitting the Pentagon and why is the hole in the Pentagon wall only 16m wide?

5. Why does Bush continue reading to the schoolchildren even after being told of the attacks?

These and dozens of other questions are raised and analyzed using witness statements, forensic evidence, and various forms of what passes for scientific conjecture. Some of the evidence is taken at face value: witnesses in New York said they heard explosions, video shows windows exploding outward; therefore, there must be explosive (debunkers reply that any building on fire will have explosions, but these bear no resemblance to the regularized explosions of a building demolition).

Other evidence is really no more than conjecture based on the absence of evidence: Why is there no wreckage of planes of the Pentagon lawn? Why isn’t there any video coverage of the plane hitting the pentagon in what must be the world’s most protected building? The conspirators’ answer is that no plane hit the Pentagon. It was a rocket. The Pentagon is hiding the truth. The F16 jets received orders to stand down. The same type of reasoning explains the absence of large debris from Flight 93 in Pennsylvania. In fact, flight 93 was diverted.

Still other evidence is based on scientific calculations. The trajectory of the plane hitting the Pentagon is improbable given the poor flying expertise of the hijackers. In New York, a 110 story building should not fall so fast, nor should it fall inward unless it were being demolished by explosives. Fires cannot get hot enough to melt steel girders; only explosives can. The WTC building 7, which was not hit by a plane, still collapsed and we cannot see any fires. This is impossible unless there was a controlled demolition.

The conclusion then, sometimes intimated as the only feasible answer, sometimes directly asserted, was that the government either contributed, allowed or actively murdered their citizens. They did so in order to justify intervention in the Middle East and the spread of the American empire under the leadership of the neoconservatives. Evidence for this plot comes from various neoconservative policy documents, notably the Committee for a New American Century which in 2000 uses the phrase “new Pearl Harbor” to denote an event which could catalyze a reformulation of American policy, (hence the title of Griffin’s book). In addition, the notion of “false flag operations” going back to CIA plans in 1962 to shoot down a US drone passenger plane and blame it on the Cubans (Operation Northwoods). In this light, 911 was needed in order to justify American intervention abroad and restrict civil rights at home.

In this scheme, Bin Laden, the former CIA operative, is but a decoy. The 19 hijackers are figments. The 911 Commission Report is a whitewash. And the mainstream press and skeptics who attack 911 truth are instruments of the government or are themselves suffering from delusions of a “cognitive dissonance” nature. If no one has blown the whistle on this elaborate plot –the air traffic controllers, Pentagon operatives, bomb-planters or other involved in the diversion – it is because they feel guilty about what they did, or are afraid of being killed.

In scientific debate, one usually begins with a hypothesis and then presents evidence. The 911 debate works backwards. Enigmas and mysteries are presented in a cumulative fashion. X happened in a strange way, or X cannot be explained by standard theories, therefore X must have been generated by a secret plan. The connecting of clues operates like a detective story, except the smoking gun is always missing and the criminal never confesses. As Jodi Dean has commented in her description of those who believe they were kidnapped by aliens, there is constant uncertainty and doubt, a constant search for yet */another/* clue, yet */another/* sign, yet */another/* verification. It is exegesis, interpretation and over interpretation. But there is no end to the journey. Internet communication, with its unlimited branches and paths, enables us to click onwards, or backwards, to search further, to find further evidence or refutation.

7. Truthers and skeptics

The 911 truth movement is well aware that people accuse them of being conspiracy theorists. And like any successful campaign, they have taken the stigma and turned it on its head. The proudly take on the mantle of conspiracy theorist, without the connotation of being mentally unbalanced. David Ray Griffin, for example, explains that the Government “has their own conspiracy theory, the conspiracy of Bin Laden and the 19 hijackers with box-cutters”. This, he says, is the most improbable conspiracy Griffin offers an “alternative conspiracy theory” which better explains all his 40 smoking gun enigmas.

The 911 truth movement also takes up those who believe that 911 occurred because of Government incompetence, known as the “incompetence theory”. Within the 911 movement there are various factions commenting on U.S. Government complicity, taking their acronyms LIHOP (Let it happen on purpose) to MIHOP (Made it happen on purpose). Certain minority factions are those who believe that no plane hit the towers either (the webfairy group explains it by use of giant holograms, while others speak of a cargo plane or rocket (“these are the no planers”). Other truthers are beginning to link 911 to other catastrophic events such as Oklahoma City (a rehearsal for 911, said one speaker at a recent meeting) and to the July 7th bombings in London. Scholars of conspiratorial thinking point out the tendency of conspiracy thinking to extend infinitely, almost rhizome like, to ever more anomalous events.

The most serious schism within the movement now centers on whether a passenger plane crashed into the Pentagon or whether it was a cruise missile or small drone plane, such that the passenger plane was shot down over Kentucky. Some factions within the movement see the missile theory as discrediting more valid aspects of the movement concerning controlled demolition and stand down. The important thing is that whatever hit the Pentagon would do least damage; hence, the plane/rocket hit the newly reconstructed section, not the part where Rumsfeld had his office, and was thus clear indication that the attack was meticulously planned.

The schisms in the movement reflect the necessity of whether all groups can join, with some activists arguing for the widest possible approach “anyone who seeks the truth about 911”. While the movement is largely leftwing and anti-Bush, now anti-Neocon, it is not without strong rightwing, anti-Semitic currents. Theories of the 4000 Israelis, the Israeli art student spies, the Mossad and American-Israeli complicity in using or blaming Arabs proliferate on Arab and Muslim websites, and according to the ADL the 911 truth movement has brought together disparate groups of Jew haters from the extreme right, middle east and anti-Israel groups from the left. (See ADL 2003, Unraveling anti-Semitic 9/11 conspiracy theories). Cross postings from the 911 truth movement appear on sites run by the American Free Press, which cooperates with the neo-Nazi Barnes Review. Critics of the 911 Truth movement often mention these holocaust denial sites, but movement leaders see this as diversions and provocations to discredit the movement, and are thus blamed on the U.S. or Israeli intelligence services. Here is just one example of such postings showing how the 911 Truth Movement must maintain vigilance.:

“The 9/11 truth movement has suffered from some infiltration by advocates of what is euphemistically called Holocaust revisionism, who have written in defense of various aspects of Holocaust Denial and have praised neo-Nazis who seek to downplay the Holocaust.

The 9/11 truth movement has attracted a lot of people who want to be instant experts. Some crave public recognition. Others, no doubt, have their unique psychological reasons, some good, some not so good. But those who make very bold conclusions while being ignorant of most of the available evidence run the risk of "foot in mouth" disease, and worse, their antics can rub off on the rest of us, especially if they seek to connect neo-Nazi pseudo historians and 9/11 truth activists in common cause.

Due to these (and other) efforts to link 9/11 skeptics with Holocaust denial, there are a fair number of citizens who think that 9/11 investigation is really all about blaming "the Jews" for the atrocity, both from those who want to blame the "Jews" and those who think that 9/11 investigation is anti-Semitism.

Not all "conspiracy theories" are true - some are blatant revisions of history to snare the gullible or those who let their anger get in the way of the facts.

The 9/11 truth movement should not be co-opted by those who want to pretend that one of the greatest crimes in history was oversold by Jews in order to justify a land grab in Palestine.

It would not be surprising if many of the voices most loudly advocating Holocaust Denial were "false flag" operatives of the Israeli government - since the fact that some crazy people promote these lies makes it more difficult to find political space to criticize Israeli human rights abuses (even though the two issues are quite separate). In other words, the specter of Holocaust Denial is used to discredit legitimate criticism of Israeli crimes -- who benefits is always a useful question to ask.”

8. Movement practice

All Movements contain leaders, disciples, programs, strategies and activist members. Movements are dynamic: people are on their way in or out; strategies are reformulated; groups and cells are organized and reorganized; former friends are suddenly defined as enemies and banned; and new potential allies are identified and cultivated.

The movement is united by a vigorous web portal 911truth.org, and by several other portals containing blogs, documents and debates. In addition there are physical meetings. In Denmark, the chemist Niels Harrit (recently retired from Copenhagen University) gives a 90 minute power point presentation on the collapse of building 7, and by implication the towers. Harrit begins by insisting that he is just a scientist, that he will make no political statements. He then shows a series of slides of the building 7 collapse, comparing it with fires and collapsed buildings elsewhere. ‘No steel framed building has ever collapsed due to fire’. He describes the official theories by the National Institute of Standards Technology to explain the collapse. NIST concluded that it was a series of fires and collapse sequence. Now building 7 happened to contain several US government offices, SEC, CIA, Mayor Giuliani’s Office of Emergency Preparedness. Harrit then uses the remaining time to show how a small amount of well placed explosive, nanothermite, could weaken the steel frames and brought the building down; again and again, the video of the collapse is shown so that it is unmistakable that it collapses ‘just like a controlled demolition’. Only a few hundred pounds of nanothermite are needed, he says. Needless to say, there are no engineers or explosive experts in the room. Near the end of the presentation Harrit receives questions, often concerned with how explosives could have been planted, why no one has talked, and he declines to speculate. Harrit and his 911 colleagues, challenged by critics, have published their findings in a new on-line journal of chemical physics. The publication fee was 800 dollars, paid by Harrit out of his university research account. Soon after publication, the editor of the journal resigned in protest, saying she knew nothing of the article. Truthers countered that she was being silent because of her links to the defense industry.

The movement’s practice also consists of various media projections. Most important are the key web portals such as 911truth.org and Scholars for 911 truth. In addition, several videos have been produced, the most well known being Loose Change, now in its third revised edition ‘final cut’, which presents conspiracy speculation in a dramatic way. You tube videos are also put up, several of them describing or explaining the collapse of the towers. The 911 scholars have themselves organized the Journal of 911 Studies which they claim is peer reviewed. However, a cursory look the association and its journal shows that many of their members are not scholars but university hangers on and has been noted, there is a proliferation of professors of English, philosophy, theology and psychology who are analyzing what are essentially matters of structural engineering or aeronautics.

The web portals keep adherents abreast of the latest articles, reports, critiques, and media events; for example, the appearance of Fetzer on American conservative TV (Bill O’Reilly), or a satire of 911 conspiracy on South Park, as well as upcoming events and conferences. At St. Marks Church in New York, there is a monthly 911 meeting, while major conferences bring together conspiracy buffs and more politicized anti-Bush, and now anti-war groups. From the 911 movement has come another group called We Are Change, whose tactic is to confront public figures with slogans like ‘What about Building 7’/ In Copenhagen there was an initial idea to have “911 home parties” where a video is shown to friend and they can see the truth. Since Niels Harrit’s ‘conversion’ in 2007, the Danish movement has concentrated on monthly demonstrations in public areas around Copenhagen, publicizing Harrit’s lectures, and the lectures themselves where 911 videos, t-shirts and stickers are sold, The lectures attract students, pensioners, and others, and are notable for their absence of critical questions or polemic. I have attended about 10 of these, and their content tends to be identical. No one has ever challenged Harrit as to the plausibility of a scenario where the US Government has planned the hijacking of 4 planes, the demolition of 3 buildings, for no ostensible reasons, and where not a single participant has yet to come forward admitting that they participate in, or know of such a plot.

Another key aspect of the web portals is to filter out or reinterpret new evidence or facts. For example, 911blogger has texts linking the September 11^th attacks with the Oklahoma City bombing and with the 7 July subway bombings in London. New, ostensibly hazardous input, such as a new Bin Laden video where he admits complicity or the video of a smiling Muhammad Atta, must now be analyzed and interpreted as yet another desperate attempt by the plotters to discredit the movement. While several truthers believe the Bin Laden videos are false, or that Bin Laden is in fact dead, there is also minute analysis of his images in these videos. Other news from the movement is the advent of new adherents, especially celebrities, former government officials or people with technical expertise. Among the former are Rosie O’Donnell, Ed Begley and Charlie Sheen. Among the latter are Bob Bowman from the first Bush administration, former German minister, a former British minister Michael Meacher, a British MI5 official named David Shayle, Dutch explosives experts who, on seeing a video, concluded that Building 7 had been demolished, and various members of the architect or pilots profession who can speak with expertise.

Aside from web portals with texts, there are also the major video productions. Some of these, such as “Loose Change” and “In Plane Sight” combine dramatic video footage with slick graphics in order to show that what appears to be possible could not have happened, the collapse was really a controlled demotion, the plane could not possibly have flown at that angle; look, there is no wreckage, etc. Other videos are simply tapes of speeches held at conferences by major figures such as Griffin. Finally, there are paraphernalia such as T-shirts with slogans propagating 911 truth (“911 was an inside job”).

In public events, conferences and meetings, 911 activists come together. These may contain a video, followed by a discussion with an authority or activist who specializes in a specific area of “911 theory”, e.g., falling buildings, the behavior of steel under fire, NORAD air traffic control, using cell phones in passenger planes, secret air bases where passengers could have been held and executed, or CIA false flag operations.

The 911 movement also tracks its own success, conducting surveys where Americans are asked whether or not they believe the “full story” of 911 remains known. Percentages of suspicious Americans remain high, at 36%. No question was explicitly asked as to whether the Bush administration planted explosives in the WTC. The questions are always of the most general nature (I, too, believe that the U.S. Government has not given us the full story about 911). Other surveys track establishment media’s interest in 911, recording with satisfaction whenever a 911 activist has been given television time, or been unjustly criticized by the likes of Bill O’Reilly or Sean Hannity. A major victory for example, was a 911 address by David Ray Griffin broadcast on C-span, indicating that the campaign for truth is succeeding.

10. Skeptics, enemies and saboteurs

Every movement thrives on an evil, unscrupulous opponent. If they are not around, there are surrogates for them. Those who are skeptical may be potential converts, while there are others whose theories are so outlandish that they may be saboteurs. Unlike cults and other fringe movements, the 911 movement has not recorded any dropouts or former converts who are disillusioned. There are no exposes of “inside the decadent 911 movement” as one might find among ex-Maoists, ex-scientologists, ex-Moonies, or other ex-cultists. And there is only one statement of the ‘I was an ex-Truther’ variety. This may be because the 911 movement has no physical presence, no camp, or site where people are physically isolated from non-adherents, and no means by which they could physically punish deviants or outcasts. It makes them different from, say, some militia groups or survivalist groups, or other outlaw fundamentalist groups who can rely on the social pressures and physical isolation of their members. To leave the 911 movement, you apparently only have to turn off your computer.

This does not mean there are no personal disputes. Especially in the New York movement, there has been conflict as the NY 911 truth has been competing with, or taken over by the We Are Change faction. Both are led by zealous leaders with checkered histories. Les Jamieson is a member of an alternative new age cult. Luke Rutkowski apparently used money collected for his faction to pay his college tuition fees (according to his ex-girlfriend). Both are in conflict with Killtown, a web presence who insists that no planes flew into the center, that it was a holograph.

Nevertheless, the movement has its enemies. The primary enemy, of course, has been the Bush government, who tried to intimidate the movement by restricting its access to key information, preventing it from coming into the mainstream press, or which uses friendly media such as Fox News to discredit them as crazy conspiracy theorists or “hate America fringe”. Obama’s election toned down this enemy.

The mainstream media are another enemy, refusing to give the movement airtime, or setting them up for ridicule on certain government-friendly talk shows, or writing tendentious exposes or talk shows in which they are outgunned. The “left gatekeepers” are one such branch of the media, as they are presumed allies who for some reason refuse to accept the movement’s pretensions to truth. Left gatekeepers operate in certain progressive media such as The Nation, Pacfica Radio, Rolling Stone magazine, and left commentators such as Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky, all of whom have bitterly denounced the truthers as diversionary. The truthers respond by accusing them of “supporting the Government’s story”. (In Denmark, the leftist newspaper “Information” is criticized for not taking the 911 Truth movement seriously).

Since access to information is the movement’s main goal, they often accuse the government of actively withholding of information only to subsequently release it in order to discredit the movement. This is particularly the case regarding the crash of flight 57 into the Pentagon, where no public video has been shown of the plane, leading to the conclusion that it was a cruise missile or a light spy plane (which could strike that part of the Pentagon which was not occupied) Under this kind of sabotage theory, it is thought that the Pentagon will one day release hidden videos (taken from a gasoline station across the street) which would show the passenger plane hitting the pentagon and therefore discredit the movement.

A second tactic feared by the 911 truthers is to plant provocateurs within the movement. These would be people with such outlandish theories (no planes flew into the WTC for example, or that the planes flew on autopilot), that it would cause a division or diversion in the movement. There are continuous speculations regarding these “bogus 911 theories” and whether the provocateurs are right-wing fanatics, or agents of the U.S. Government to isolate the larger truths of the movement. Truthers are constantly condemning the debunking, anti-conspiracy sites for their focus on the most outlandish theories, such as “no planers”. They concentrate on these theories in order to hide the real truths exposed by the 911 truth movement.

Similar anxieties are expressed regarding certain right wing groups of the anti-New world Order or anti-Semitic variety. The right wing groups, like the extreme left, can have an antipathy toward the neocons, as many neoconservatives are strongly pro-Israel, are Jewish, and have had a history of liberal thinking and cosmopolitan activity. Most 911 activists seem to lie on the left, especially in Europe, and 911 activism is most prominent on the coasts and on university campuses, hardly a base for the militia-oriented, anti-Semitic anti-New World Order groups. However, there is a continuing fear that 911 can be taken over or exploited by right-wing, holocaust denial forces.

Yet the movement’s most vitriolic conflict seems to be with those who take them on directly, those who try to reveal their convoluted, illogical thinking by debunking their arguments. These are the debunkers.

11. The debunkers

The debunkers are a group of largely left-wing skeptics who see the 911 truth movement as a ridiculous waste of political energy. Debunkers go beyond the simple statements by Noam Chomsky and or by Alexander Cockburn from The Nation. The 911 truthers subscribe to Chomsky’s view of U.S. foreign policy, Griffin for example cites him several times. However, Chomsky and others view the truthers as nothing short of a lunatic fringe. This has led some 911 truthers to construct an entire left-wing conspiracy against them, the so-called “left gatekeepers” who hidden under their progressive, still support the official explanation and refuse to reconsider the explanation offered by the 911 truth movement. Behind the left gatekeepers are liberal foundations such as the Soros, Ford and McArthur foundations who finance certain left-wing media.

As more vehement critics of the 911 truth movement and its explanations, the debunkers have their own loosely structured community. They join together in sites such as debunking911.com, “screw loose change.org”, the James Randi Educational Foundation (formerly the amazing Randi, he debunks parapsychology, alien abduction and other alternative theories), various skepticism sites, and their Journal of Debunking 911 Studies. The debunkers attempt to take apart the arguments of the truth movement by noting their absence of logic, their overlooking of key evidence, manipulation of data, or misinterpretation of obvious facts. For example, in analyzing Truther video evidence of controlled demolition of the towers, the debunkers point out that the buildings collapse from the top downwards, whereas a demolition would have explosions beginning at the bottom of the buildings. (the problem, of course, is that the collapse of the towers is hidden by thousands of tons of dust and smoke). In connection with building 7, the truthers’ evidence is based on video making it appear that the building collapses all by itself. Pictures from a different angle reveal that the building was already severely damaged by collapsing debris, that there were several fires and that after 8 hours of fire, a collapse could be expected. In the Pentagon case, the truthers make a case for the small entry hole in the building and the absence of airplane debris, or in cases where some parts are found, showing that they could not have possibly have come from a Boeing 757. The debunkers provide explanations for how the plane penetrated several walls of the Pentagon and thereupon disintegrated, how the small hole was made by firemen trying to enter the building and not the airplane fuselage, and uses a Boeing airline parts manual to match the few photos of damaged airline parts. Finally, the debunkers note obvious lacunae in the truthers’ analyses of what went on in the passenger planes, the crash of the plane near Pittsburgh, and of late, Bin Laden’s own admission of complicity and prior record of terrorist activity.

The debunking texts have achieve diabolical status within the movement, with the most infamous being the article from */Popular Mechanics/* which deconstructs 8 of the more well known 911 truth arguments. This article has now been expanded into a book. And in /Scientific American,/ Michael Shirmer has also attacked the 911 truthers linking them with holocaust denial sites and anti-Semitic groups, a tactic criticized by the truthers as “bracketing”. Hence, in “debunking the debunker”, well known truther Jim Hoffman from 911research.org writes that Shirmer

“begins with the Pentagon no-plane theory and ends with the Jewish
conspiracy rumor -- ideas with no supporting evidence, which most people
will reflexively reject. Sandwiched between them are two valid ideas --
the lack of timely military response and the controlled demolition of
the towers -- which Shermer attempts to further muddle with omissions and distortions: he fails to mention …. In contrast, 911Research speculates that the attack was executed by a team numbering fewer than the alleged hijackers: a feat made possible through computer automation and the exploitation of
top-down military command structures. ….His primary technique is to use hoaxes and unscientific ideas -- long promoted on the web and in videos -- to bracket the valid ideas that he seeks to shield the reader from. ….That Shermer went to such great lengths to thoroughly misrepresent the painstaking, scientific, evidence-based work of 911Research is a testament to the site's success.”

Truthers take debunking seriously enough that the main truther guru, David Ray Griffin has now also written a refutation of the debunking literature, “Debunking 9/11 Debunking”,  highlighting what he sees as gaps in their explanations.
Of course, debunkers have then debunked Griffin’s own debunking exercise of the debunkers. Similarly, the truther film ‘Loose Change’ has been debunked frame by frame, while a blog, ‘screwloose change.org’ includes videos and comments mocking what are called the ‘troofers’. One truther, of course, now has screwscrewloosechange.org

While some of the debunkers focus on the facts of the tragedy, writing extraordinarily long and detailed texts, others focus on the psychological or sociological profile of the movement, showing, for example, that 911 Scholars for Truth has few bonafide academics and no civil or structural engineers. Or that Steven Jones, the physicist with the most widely known article on the physics of building collapse, had a previous study on the appearance of Jesus Christ in Peru (Indeed, Jones was placed on paid leave by Brigham Young University and has now accepted a retirement package).

12. Who are these people and what do they believe?

The grand narrative of 911 truth is a combination of traditional scientific inquiry – searching for evidence -- and diabolical thinking. The scientific inquiry reflects an idea that we don’t know the full story. This is certainly true. None of us know, because there is no full story of events such as 911. The mechanics of falling skyscrapers or the aeronautics of passenger planes smashing into buildings, the way in which hijackers could enter a cockpit or the possibilities that cell phones can work while flying at low altitudes, not to mention US Air Force airplane intercept protocols, all of these are certainly mysteries to be solved. Who did it? Why did they want to do it? How did they do it? How did they get away with it? Conspiracy theories provide comfortable answers to all these questions. And in an era of uncertainty, we certainly need comfort.

Yet outside the conspiratorial universe of the 911 events, we know that planes have been hijacked elsewhere, that there are suicide terrorists before and after 911, that there are Islamic fundamentalists, and that millions of people hate the United States for various reasons ranging from support for Israel to a presumed ‘war against Islam’. We know that the WTC was attacked before, and we know that people can react to real or perceived injustice in unexpected, horrific ways. We also know that those who head the U.S. Government have had grand designs for American power, spreading democracy, free trade, and military security all at the same time; and that along with visions of benevolent American power there are being constructed evil, unscrupulous enemies who don’t fight fairly, i.e., who use tactics of assymetrical warfare, and that some of these people would possess what Hofstadter called “the paranoid style in American politics”. The 911 conspiracy theory forgets the first half of these facts, and raises the second.

From these visions, from the frustrations of a left who is unable to

mobilize politically but who is looking for a diabolical evildoer, we get the jump from skeptical reasoning and critique of U.S. foreign policy to the explanations offered by 911 truth: to the postulate that Bush and Co. WOULD risk a plan to kill thousands of their fellow citizens in order to justify an attack on the Muslim world and control Middle East oil; and we get the jump that Bush’s people COULD carry out such a mission:, i.e., plant bombs, auto-direct planes, kidnap and kill passengers, make up fake cell phone calls, fake Bin Laden videos, falsify passenger lists, stand down or divert military interceptions, send missiles or spy planes into the Pentagon, all while subsequently destroying any trail of evidence and ensuring that everyone in this plot –hundreds of people -- could keep the secret via a continuing cover-up. By any standard of logical inference, we go beyond the plausible.

There are mysteries about 911, and there are plausible explanations for some of these mysteries. For other mysteries, however, we do not have the full explanation. Conspiracy theories help us to fill in the blanks. They make their participants a part of history. For the rest of us, however, the absence of plausible explanations means we have to gather more data or look at these events in another way, or accept that there things we just do not know, or chalk them up to coincidence. The grand conspiracy of the truthers, while emotionally comforting, falls flat due to contrary evidence: For example, why hijack planes at all? Why hijack planes and /blow up three New York skyscrapers when only one of these would be enough? Why not just repeat the 1993 plot to blow up the World Trade Center from the parking garage. Who needs the complex set up with hijackers and 4 planes?

Plausibility means asking certain kinds of common sense questions and looking for common sense (Occam’s razor) answers. Hence, for believers in controlled demolition, they must answer how did ‘they’ get the buildings to explode immediately the planes hit them? Similarly, if the Pentagon is in on this master plan, why risk hitting the Pentagon? Finally, the U.S. has not needed such mass murder events to go to war. True, the U.S. declared war on Japan after Pearl Harbour and bombed Bosnia after the attack on a marketplace in Sarajevo. But other military adventures (bombing Serbia, the Gulf War, or the invasion of Iraq were not the direct result of any mass murders). Recent analyses on factional disputes between CIA and FBI, poor judgement of intelligence data are more effective explanations for why the U.S. failed to prevent the 911 hijackings. Instead of secret machinations by an all-powerful cabal of advisors, we should take seriously the disastrous amount of incompetence, hubris, bureaucratic in-fighting, and naivete that apparently thrives at the highest levels of American policy-making.

13. Taking a stand

Anthropologists are supposed to have empathy with the groups they study. We are supposed to understand them, even if we do not sympathize with them. This would entail that we as anthropologists accept the 911 truth practictioners as an ‘alternative’ view of the world, a way in which people make sense of an extraordinary historical event.

Anthropologists are also academics. Academics are supposed to work with their minds, using reason to solve problems. We are supposed to make reasoned conjectures based on evidence, and we are supposed to eliminate explanations which are unlikely, biased or so improbable as to be based on false, exaggerated, extraordinary or unverifiable claims. This means combating obscurantism, including obscurantism disguised as science, and especially the kind of diabolical conspiracy theory that blames a hidden cabal of all-powerful military/security officials for the hijacking of four planes and the destruction of the World Trade Center. The 911 truth movement is one kind of obscurantism. Behind legitimate questions about the U.S. government’s responsibility in preventing a tragic disaster, the 911 truth movement provides explanations which border on “diabolical evil”. Its populist character, pitting a truthful people against evil, secretive, power, jumps over the intermediary institutions, power structures and contradictions which we need to understand in order to explain how the 911 hijackings took place. In its vision of all powerful evil and its cabal of neoconservatives ready to conquer the world, 911truth acts as a religions movement. In its paranoia about an evil government who hide the truth and the media who refuse to tell the truth, it acts like a cult. In its cavalier rejection of conflicting evidence and inability to face up to its own outlandish claims in the face of mountains of counterevidence, it acts irresponsibly. The presence of philosophers and theologians (many pensioned, with time on their hands), not to mention some former government officials – all these people out of power but now with a cause and a following -- is therefore no accident. Anthropologically, we can ‘understand’ the truthers, but we must also take their grand theories very seriously; specifically, we must point out where they cross the line between honest skepticism and critical inquiry on the one hand and conspiracist obscurantism on the other. No better illustration of this line is a 2007t column in, of all places, *Rolling Stone* magazine which constructs the conspirators’ dialogue between Rumsfeld, Cheney and Bush: “Well,” says Rumsfeld, “why don’t we send these Arab hijackers on planes and then we blow up the world trade center so we can invade Afghanistan but blame it on Saddam Hussein.” This is 911 theory of the Monty Python variety. No scholar should take such theorizing seriously. To present it as “an alternative view” or “as the other side” legitimates it in the same way that certain naive academics have legitimated holocaust denial, or the holocaust deniers’ academic mouthpiece, the ‘Journal of Historical Review’. This is why some 911 truthers are called ‘911 deniers’.

How should responsible scholars deal with such groups? Persecuting or ridiculing them, one might argue, only makes them stronger. Ignoring them, however, gives a certain credence to their views. Debating them in an academic setting tends to legitimize them (which is why Deborah Lipstadt, who brought down David Irving and the Holocaust Denial industry, refuses to debate Holocaust deniers directly). Perhaps this is the dilemma of observing conspiracy practices. Showing the gaps in their theories does not help convert people from one view to the other. Conversion is an emotional process, not the result of argument. The Kennedy assassination buffs are still going strong.

We are dealing with conspiracy practitioners as a social solution to more existential problems. Ian Hacking, a philosopher who studied the history of multiple personality order, called multiple personality “a new way to be an unhappy person”. Conspiracy practice, the search for larger frameworks which structure our lives based on demonic plots, can be seen as a solution for some people whose lives are affected by uncertainty and anxiety. Yet this is only a psychological explanation. Anthropologically, our task remains to find out why conspiracy thinking attracts so many, that is, why conspiratorial thinking helps so many to put plots and characters together in precisely this way, and why people who act rationally and reasonably in everyday life can also fall for an explanation which is thoroughly implausible. Conspiracy theory is history for the lazy. It attempts to tie up all the knots by using clues or anomalies. For this reason it selects evidence. History, of course, also selects evidence. Is there a difference? Yes, historians believe that there are accidents, coincidences, confluences of events; conspiracy theories believe in human actors who can plan and execute their plots down to the most minute detail, and then cover it up for years, even decades. Conspiracy theory is a theory of total agency by human actors. It is a theory where the worst intentions have no unintended consequences. Yet, here it would be wise to paraphrase Marx: Men make conspiracies, but they don’t make conspiracies as they please. This is probably the most damming evidence against 911 Truth movement.