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Australia is not a land of conspiracy theories, compared with the United States. We are not a nation of 'Truthers' blaming government for the 9/11 attacks, or Holocaust deniers, nor typically are we Elvis spotters, alien abductees or sceptics about the moon landings.

Still, we too are quick to believe in secret cabals, high-level organised paedophile rings, and covert social control, while much more heavy-duty weirdness gets an airing on the fringe of mainstream society. Yet near-universal scientific consensus is sacrificed to political ideology in our so-called climate change debate, while deep-seated socio-economic problems are blamed on asylum seekers.

The one conspiracy that many Australians willingly admit is that the Church is an organised network of abuse, deception and misinformation, from the Dan Brown end to the Royal Commission end among 'the cultured despisers of religion.' Though, as I tell people who accuse the Church of high-level cover-ups and sophisticated evasiveness, I have been in parishes where we were not organised enough to deal with leaky guttering.

All this has been on my mind of late since I read a study by two formidable yet extremely engaging Sydney academics, Chris Fleming (a friend of mine and, like me, an authority on the work of René Girard) and Emma A. Jane, who in her former life was a journalist called Emma Tom. Their book is called *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)—and it is only small, at 139 pages! Here is a solid work of scholarship, philosophically informed, yet readable and laugh-out-loud funny.

The catalogue of freakish conspiracy theories, many with their mirror image in the solemn procession of conspiracy debunkers, is incredible. Did you know about the secret world government of covertly reptilian human-like aliens, or that President Obama is not an American and his birth certificate is clearly faked, or that KFC is a white supremacist conspiracy to make its poor black American consumers infertile?

Yet the sober truth is that most actual conspiracies, like Watergate, are banal and bumbling, with none of the covert sophistication and global discipline that conspiracy theories typically demand. So why the need to believe in alternative realities and to dismiss no end of credible evidence?

Fleming and Jane see it all in terms of failing modernity. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century replaced the ages of faith. Obedience to Church authority gave way to free rational inquiry, scepticism about unproven claims, and the right of informed individuals to make up their own minds. The nineteenth-century masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) then pulled the rug out from under the new authority of reason, revealing powerful historical and psychological forces that influenced human individuals.

Today the world of knowledge is multiplying exponentially and all of it comes mediated. We do not even really know what is in our food, how any technologies in our homes actually work, or what pre-programmed biases underpin the operations of our Internet search engines. In other words, we are taught to be independent and accomplished seekers after truth at a time when all truth comes mediated—when we have to trust others and once again depend on ‘authorities,’ from understanding the climate to working the DVR. And we do not typically like it.

We like to think that we can resist the mind-control of mass communications, along with the encroachments of bureaucracy and regulatory discourses, while the lurking threat of disorder, chaos and trauma threatens our modern myth of order and control. Hence we crave empowerment, with some of us insisting on an antisocial fantasy of autonomy.

The modern social sciences have acted to disempower individuals, too. Today’s received wisdom is that our actions are significantly pre-determined by the impact of family, peers, cultural conditioning, economic determinants, education and social environment, all at the expense of personal agency. Hence so-called agency panic, which points to a need for power to be put back into human hands. Conspiracy theories are a way of giving voice to this whole cluster of concerns, empowering those who hold them and restoring faith in human agency.

Conspiracy theories blame both natural and human problems on human agency. They promise us the truth, and in a way that cannot be disproved. Every rational counter argument or accusation of madness against the theory is seen to reflect either deception or ill-will. Our conspiracy theories make us right, invincible, and free of blame, because someone else is responsible for whatever the problem is—both the evil conspirators, and the mass of ‘sheeple’ (sheep-people) who are so easily led and deceived.

Here we find ourselves at a new stage of cultural evolution. In pre-modern times human agency was understood to cause natural phenomena, like plagues and crop failures, with someone needing to be punished if things were to be put right. Cue the witch trial. Survivals of this primitive thinking gave us the racial taint of blackness in the American South and Jewishness in Nazi Germany, while in Stalinist Russia whole apartment buildings were emptied and the residents shipped to the Gulag when one ‘traitor’ was found among them. You cannot build a progressive scientific and technological society on this basis, hence our modern world with its sense of natural causes explained by science could only get started when we stopped looking for witches and learned to work the levers of nature.

Nowadays, however, we are recovering a sense of human agency at the root of adverse natural outcomes, from pollution and climate change to our Western epidemic of chronic diseases. Hence there is a new openness to the older primitive thinking, which in the hands of conspiracy theorists can annexe this rediscovery of human agency and carry it to dangerous lengths.

Here is my real concern with conspiracy theories. They make victims, and they shore-up the cohesion of a group by de-humanising and defaming its designated enemies. Outbreaks of this contagion in the Nazi-Soviet madness of last century are becoming increasingly mainstream in today’s West. And it is clear that the application of reason will not help us, because reason is an Enlightenment virtue that is fast losing its capacity to calm and restrain fevered imaginations everywhere.

Drs Fleming and Jane offer three remedies. First, just be aware of how truth is mediated nowadays and learn to operate in that environment without panic—do not rush to Enlightenment scepticism and its myth of autonomy, because these wheels are now

spinning in the cognitive mush of our times and they will give us insufficient traction. Second, better to laugh at conspiracy theorists than try to argue with them—you can never win, by definition, and you might just find yourself turning into something equally as bad. Finally, in praise of naiveté, we must simply learn that there is much we cannot explain—and that, put directly and uncomplicatedly, ‘%\$#@ happens’.

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