

The Warren Commission, Postmodernity  
and the Rise of Conspiratorial Thinking in America

Emily Lobo

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## **Introduction**

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices,” said William James, American philosopher and psychologist, in his study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. All humans and human groups become entrenched in some form of bias during their lifetime, but James noted how our perceived strict biases can be quite fragile. Certain understandings of the world carry more subjective weight than others, based on one’s learned predispositions, such as culture and history. However, these formed meaning systems – the ways of explaining the world in which we live – will always carry some form of bias. Such systems are typically normative and offer either a legitimation or challenge to societies’ social order. Conspiracy theories can also be considered a method of meaning-making. However, there can be diversity between and within conspiracy theory beliefs (like varieties of religions).

Around the 1960s we witnessed the rise of the theory of postmodernity, where a greater accepted multiplicity of local narratives grew over the grand narratives of the “modern” era. Postmodernism was formally named by French philosopher and sociologist Jean-Francois Lyotard in the late 1970s. He defined the theory as the “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Couchman 72; Butler 13, 15), identifying the state of being unwilling or unable to believe in overarching interpretations of major events, beliefs and experiences. Metanarratives tend to ignore the individual narratives of our lives that do not fit neatly into categories constructed by major institutional authorities. Such accounts have a disconnection from the personal and push

individuals to doubt grand truth claims made, in favor of a narrative where the self is visible and heard. People then question the motives of those who produce and disseminate such ideas.

Specifically, it can be argued that this revolution in meaning and narrative-making rose after American President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. More importantly, it was how the major institutions of the American government and law enforcement agencies reacted to this event which bolstered the demise of metanarratives and built the foundational beliefs of postmodernity. Perceived deceptions were especially tied to the Warren Commission, founded to investigate the assassination. It was created by former vice president and then president, Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson chose Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren to lead the committee and determine whether Lee Harvey Oswald acted as a lone shooter (Aguilar and Wecht 4-5). We can witness the rise of conspiratorial thinking in America at this time. Government disenchantment contributed to the wish (or need) to believe in alternative forms of authority and accounts even if the alternatives are just as, if not more, chaotic. The ability to choose which narratives to believe in can provide freedom but can also carry the disorder of loss and new responsibilities. This requires citizens to critically rethink how they construct their world. While biases exist, thinking critically is vital. This paper examines the role of the postmodern condition in relation to the abundance of conspiracy theories following the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. By examining Lyotard's theory of postmodernity, and those who expanded on his ideas, we can highlight how the assassination of JFK marked the onset of the postmodern conspiracy. This includes the deconstruction of trust, the breakdown of "objective" reality and identity markers as well as the use of new mass media technologies, such as the film camera and the television.

### **Identity and Agency**

When social disengagement and alienation become common, belief in conspiracy theories can provide a sense of belonging, community and agency (Moulding et al. 346). Most people can no longer strictly identify themselves with one or few markers of identity such as religion, nationality, or ethnicity. These markers no longer (if ever) have one concrete method of describing what “you” are. They are not ahistorical, apolitical and they involve a wide variety of meanings, interpretations and secondary characteristics. In the past, such descriptors and their respective institutions were often believed to be firm authorities on how people should behave and what they should believe. There seemed to be a more cohesive belief in who authority figures were or had to be. This is no longer the case. Social disengagement is especially common when the previously overarching trust in institutions withers; the effects on identity-making were jarring and became a feature of American society after World War II. This produced great tension between differing views of the “truth”, which is something we can witness within the JFK investigation as well as today.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida asserted that belief, under postmodernism, became grounded more in first-person stories and experiences (Butler 28). He coined the term “deconstruction”, regarding the idea that those living in postmodernity are not very interested in empirical verification (Butler 28). Christopher Butler argues that those living in Western democracies, such as the United States, are more likely to agree with Lyotard and Derrida over those in non-democratic regions (15). Cultural context shifts the execution of postmodernity (Jameson 6). Without the influence of capitalism, the substantial exploration of existentialism, the military industrial complex, imperialism and the “definitive” struggle between good and evil (i.e. capitalism versus communism during the Cold War), the result of a skeptical and

postmodern world may not have occurred (Butler 15). Butler believes that the West was more “liberated” to explore postmodernity to some degree (15). It can be said that the West became more confused with identity construction amid such varying options.

The postmodern condition is not homogeneous and is made up of varying cultural features (Jameson 4-6). The permission or rebellion of the layers of identity is a major part of postmodernity and we are aware that self-identity is not as simple as the picture that the Enlightenment painted. There were considerably more “strict” markers of identity in the past, often based on binary distinction. Without the ability or desire to regain a sense of shared community and reality that is culturally dominant, Frederic Jameson believes we will be relegated to the idea that life is simply made up of random differences (6). The human mind can find this problematic as we believe in pattern-seeking and control over causes and consequences to some degree. The idea that all life is simply random can be quite devastating. Thus, we cannot shift from metanarratives to no narratives at all, instead we shift to local narratives (Butler 28). Conspiracies allow us space to construct explanations when the official narrative does not seem to make sense. There appears to be a modicum of control involved, comforting to believers. People everywhere appreciate and understand a world formed by predictable cause-reaction events (LaBoeuf and Norton 128). This allows us to learn from both good and bad causes and consequences, to either reproduce or avoid them in the future. However, when events’ explanations cannot fit within our existing identities this can be worldview shattering. While JFK’s assassination could be attributed to Lee Harvey Oswald, an American with known-Communist leanings, the reactions of the government, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) did not align with existing

Americana. There were hundreds of witnesses who saw their president shot, some even recording it on still or moving film. However, as compared to these testimonies the subsequent reports that followed the event were not as honest as expected; key evidence and accounts were said to be left out to create a specific narrative (Aguilar and Wecht 4). While a shift in American identity had occurred in the past, most recently during WWII, this was an “inside job”.

Conspiracies provide a real emotional experience and network for believers; they form emotional communities in a postmodern era where identity and meaning-making is not as linear as it may have once been (Panchenko 159). Much of the world, especially the West, experienced the end of the dominant power of religion during the Enlightenment, followed by the end of science as the dominant power under postmodernity. Moulding et al. state that individuals who believe in conspiracies are likely to be “higher in powerlessness, social isolation and anomia” (346). They find meaning, safety and control within the construction, expansion and belief of alternative explanatory systems (Moulding et al. 346). Often, when we feel that events are out of our control or the control of those we trust, we seek out or create alternative explanations which provide a sense of management. At the same time, conspiracy theories can place blame on a known devil rather than mere randomness (Moulding et al. 345). Yet, ironically, while conspiracy theorists create alternative narratives as a mechanism of control, they most often perceive themselves as pieces in a different (and usually grander) malevolent scheme (LaBoeuf and Norton 139). They substitute one subservient complex for another. Generally, experiment 3 of LaBoeuf and Norton’s study shows that this matching no longer arises once people believe they can predict their world again (even temporarily) (136).

Lastly, one may connect modern conspiracy theories to the functions, ideas and narratives of religion. This was a major factor in identity formation, especially before the Enlightenment. Both concepts create and provide an environment for the context of social solidarity (Panchenko 160). Panchenko states that conspiracy theories may become an extremely influential form of social imagination (if not the norm) due to their relation to other forms of reality-making (160). Conspiracy theories, typically based on secrecy and distrust in one form or another, concurrently suggest that there is some secret good that works against the evil. Like religions, the belief in conspiracies help reshape the classic good versus evil narrative throughout time. They provide some sense of stability, agency, identity and social bonding to those who believe, in a time otherwise rife with distrust and disconnection.

### **The Disillusion of Truth**

A mistake of the Enlightenment era was the search for an “Ultimate Truth”. This is the notion that it is reasonable to arrive at a single and unified truth, even though as humans we can only access cultural discourses with bias. It was at this time that the Enlightenment focused on the Western perspective and put down others. While we can aim to find truths that are more objective and shared among one another, there is no inherent nature to social truths. To search for a truth can be considered delusional and forces the creation of grand narratives with set events and actors (West e118). Postmodern individuals question existing “inherent” truths, the idea of what is true and who is telling it.

Set in the middle of the Cold War, the 1960s catapulted espionage and fabrications among and between the American Allies and the Soviet Allies. Truth was made more obscure and its biases were made more apparent. JFK’s presidency and assassination were bound within

a fearful and paranoid era, the same conditions rife for conspiracy theories. Interestingly, Kennedy's administration during the Cold War saw the highest public trust numbers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century despite (or because of) great fear of the unknown (Pew Research Center). Trust has never reached Kennedy-era numbers again (since 2007 it has hardly ever exceeded 30%). N.T. Wright, a Christian theologian, theorises that credibility in one area must be balanced by delegitimizing another (Couchman 72). Thus, for the Warren Commission to be persuasive, other narratives would have to be equally wrong. So, even theories questioning how and why JFK died are most often relegated to the realm of conspiracy theories, as they are not part of the official report. Creating such strict boundaries sets us up for failing to know what genuinely occurs. Wood claims that even by naming something a "conspiracy theory" there is the suggested allegation of disapproval and the label shifts "reasonable suspicion [to] irrational paranoia" (695). Additionally, Johnson notes that, as in history, the concept of truth is a powerful tool used as a mechanism of control to maintain class-based oppressions (qtd. in Couchman 72). To find a middle ground, consider Couchman's position – conspiracy theorists often participate in what they accuse institutions and dominant authorities of doing: cherry-picking and altering information in order to suit their preconceived biases and beliefs (74). Both sides create their own truth and struggle for power.

Berger and Luckmann wrote on relativism in their book, *Social Construction of Reality*, published in 1966. They stated that all knowledge, even basic, is created and maintained by social interactions and all forms of knowledge can exist so long as there are actors to create and maintain it (Berger and Luckmann 33-37). However, there is also the assumption that one form of reality is "paramount": the reality of everyday life (35-37). This provides some order to



otherwise chaos. To subvert this reality, one must either strain their will or have the reality disrupted by a problem (37-38). Conspiracy theorists engage in both. Rather than accepting the truth as set by authorities, thus returning to everyday shared reality, the conspiracy theorist embraces an alternative reality and narrative. Rather than wholly accepting the Warren Commission's report on JFK's assassination (the problem), conspiracies participate in alternative identity and explanatory formation (the strain of will).

While boosting the individuals' confidence, Derrida's theory also removes one's faith in larger bodies of knowledge and "fact" (Butler 28). Tendrils of doubt move through society as many local narratives are put forward. Assassination witnesses were involved in varying degrees of experience during JFK's assassination, providing differing accounts of what they understand to have happened. The Warren Commission too had its own bias - mostly set by then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover - to prove the shooting could have been done by a single shooter thereby ignoring testimonies which simply did not fit (Aguilar and Wecht 4). In turn, this has highly influenced how conspiracy theorists view truth. Couchman also claims that a focus on multiple small scale or local narratives are less likely to face the same suspicion of metanarratives (72). Grand and sweeping claims are very common in our world of globalization but much less easy to "trace" or confirm. Like Derrida's theory, it can be said that while belief is important one can be surer in their specific experiential reality.

As negotiated realities are affirmed they become everyday or "objective", especially entrenched for those generations which were not direct witnesses to a creation-narrative (Berger and Luckmann 35). In the past, problems could be "solved" with established religious, spiritual, governmental or scientific explanations, respective to culture, socioeconomic status

and location in the world. The likelihood of truth was thought to be within reach. However, the postmodern condition disrupts this – we know more now about specific subjective experiences than ever before. One “truth” has become improbable and relativism is easier to digest (Butler 16). Considering this disruption, one must reinterpret their given, “factual” reality (Berger and Luckmann 37-38). However, the relativism in the postmodern era makes it very difficult to conduct any hypothesis or to collect data as one can believe that all experiences and concepts, including science and history, are subjective within a network of possibilities. Similarly, conspiracy theories have become another facet of such constructed realities (Butler 21). In general, the term “conspiracy theory” itself has expanded to “routine mistrust of authority” (Wood 695). The idea of large secret cabals working together is not the only focus anymore. Truth has become relative, non-committal and undefinable, based on constructed frameworks (Butler 16; Couchman 72). The American public has continued to challenge institutionalizations, since this time, which were agreed upon through societal mutual agreement and diversity of expertise (Berger and Luckmann 60-61).

Any socially constructed experience or belief can become as real as any other physical or neurological occurrence when it is believed to be real in the mind (James, Lecture 1). Conspiracy narratives represent realistic social and cultural struggles with trust and narrative building occurring within their given society (Panchenko 158). Wholeheartedly believing that all ideas labelled as “conspiracy theories” are unbelievable may be equally irrational compared to the extreme, far-fetched theories. Some questions and theories may be beneficial to sussing out pro-social truth frameworks (Moulding et al. 345). The postmodern condition’s openness and lack of bonding to any one authority, such as science or religion, allowed for the

deconstruction and distrust of previously accepted truth discourses. Everything has become a candidate for the literal and legitimate, and consequently the questionable and critiqued, within the current era (Butler 24-25).

### **Mass Media**

The 1960s witnessed the rise of the popularity of television as a new medium of communication. Both this and the dissemination of photographs and film greatly contributed to how the public eventually viewed the JFK assassination. TV and photographs greatly influence who provides and who gets access to information. In the past these could only be the tools of the wealthy, but by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century more and more people harnessed such technology. Abraham Zapruder was one of these people. He captured the assassination of Kennedy in Dallas on his colour motion camera ("JFK Assassination..."), and his film clip became one of the most viewed scenes for study, debate and historical documentation. Both forms of media, however, also highlight the concept of multiple angles from which to view the world (in association with the disruption of social connection). Often an entire event will not and cannot be captured on a single camera; lens angles and obstructions are partial to certain aspects, people, and materials while cutting off others. This is likened to the idea of radical, or strict, social constructionism, or the idea that people, things and ideas exist in relation to one another and are not absolute or bound unto themselves (Berger and Luckmann 15). Much like the angle of the Zapruder film, our societies are subjective, implying no essential or objective reality exists. This opposes Berger and Luckmann's theory, mentioned above, that a paramount reality will come to fruition. Many people do not subscribe to strict social constructionism, but through mass media

forms we can see how soft or contextual constructionism is created via multiple angles, mediums and biases.

Technologies such as print, radio, television, and now the internet, provide many with a sense of shared reality, where differences of time and space are greatly reduced. This allows for a unity which is not often possible in the postmodern condition. Still, these technologies simultaneously promote multiplicities of realities (though we choose which one(s) to adhere to most). Postmodernity challenges our idea that certain ideas are inherently correct as they may have appeared in the past. The mass media available in 1963 greatly affected how, when, where and in what format people learned of the last moments of their president. The public was given more choice to determine what is true, who is telling the truth and their reasons. When Kennedy was shot there was still great trust that the American government's role was to keep the public informed and safe from harm. Particularly, because this was during the Cold War, Americans were intent on trusting their government as the alternative was unfathomable. Many believed that if you were not for American ideals, i.e. capitalism, you were communist-leaning (Michaels 19-20). However, mutations occur naturally in the evolution of cultures and these can become "realistic" once accepted and posited by "canonization and academic institutionalization" (Jameson 4). America had been invested in the Kennedy family for years and many considered them the equivalent of a royal family. Many believed that the Warren Commission was supposed to provide answers as to how and why JFK was killed, however it became clear that J. Edgar Hoover was more interested in maintaining his preconceived theory of a single shooter than of determining what really occurred (Aguilar and Wecht 4-5). The FBI and CIA allegedly did not provide all information for the commission to amalgamate a proper

report (Aguilar and Wecht 5). The published report ignored evidence and testimony, which has since been found out over the last fifty-five years, which did not fit a particular narrative. This event and subsequent suspicions created a mutation in the American psyche regarding trust for their government and would be devastating for their otherwise unduly-patriotism. The erosion of trust in public institutions mutated and is now (at least somewhat) in the hands of the public population and the media, and has greatly influenced conspiratorial thinking.

Even at the time of publishing, the results of the Warren Commission were highly contentious. Those who captured film and photos on their own devices deemed their own images and experiences valid, beyond that which the commission divulged. It is estimated that at least 32 people have either film or photographs of the last moments of Kennedy's life (Bugliosi 291). It is natural that they will be compared against each other and the Warren Commission. During the 1960s the TV and film camera were relatively new beasts which brought together a larger variety of news networks and information dissemination, as well as the speed for such information to flow. One could now be connected, frequently, with regions, people and stories apart from their location. These simultaneously became obstacles that inhibited belief in an officially distributed narrative by previously dominant authority figures. The commission may have been embraced in the past but was now challenged. N.T. Wright posits the idea that humans inhabit a "mediascape" rather than a landscape: we live in an artificial environment formed by the media (Couchman 74). In this case, the American government and FBI, via the Warren Commission, attempted to establish a mediascape aside from local and personal narratives. But considering Derrida's theory, while the Warren Commission is considered the official report, there are many who will not believe this over their

experiences and continue to tell their narrative. The official report cannot override the experiences of the individuals. This leads to conspiracy theory formation. It was through the accessibility of contemporary media available, such as television, film and cameras, that the debate began surrounding what happened to JFK in 1963. Perhaps with the growth in technology and media use, as well as access to first-hand experiences we may not escape the multiplicities of reality afforded through these mechanisms. The rise of conspiracy theories may be the result of living in a postmodern world in which nothing (yet everything) can be believed (Butler 16).

### **Conclusion**

Conspiracy theories are a postmodern method of meaning-making in a world where the good and evil of the world are no longer clear and people have more agency to draw these boundaries. Generally considering the relatively recent shifts in trust of the American government, false reporting, as well as ideological breakdowns it is difficult to pinpoint who is “good” or “bad”. Perhaps instead of terming things in such black and white categories we must learn to critically analyze all facets of society – to understand that it is the population who shapes our shared everyday and “true” reality. A dichotomous world is not as simple as many religious contexts and the Enlightenment may have led us to believe. Instead we must focus on the promotion of education and critical thinking. While we are not experts in everything, we must be able to assess those who are. Science should be challenged, as retesting is part of its design, constantly be tested and retested, but the challenge should be logical, not based out of fear or paranoia. Butler notes that objectivity as a myth can be utilized constructively to tackle tangible social realities, rather than a nihilistic obstacle (32-33).

Since the 1960s there has been a downward trajectory of focused trust, and a breakdown of strict identities. Rather than ignoring such chaos we may choose to utilize our known diversity. The varying angles of media, identity and trust may allow us unprecedented freedom to engage with the world. One must attempt to understand postmodernism as a culturally dominant theme, though one experienced heterogeneously. It allows for specific values of a society to be brought forward (Jameson 4). The assassination of John F. Kennedy immensely changed how the American psyche places faith in institutions and agreed-upon reality. Those living in America had placed high value on the trust in the government and law enforcement prior to the 1960s, but much of this changed after JFK's assassination. The results of this worldview shattering have sent ripple effects through that society and is witnessed in present day. It works past the modernist view of authority via only agreed upon official narratives from science, the government or otherwise. The public also has the power to be an authoritative figure with the power to shift narratives. In the relatively new era of postmodernity perhaps conspiracy theories are not as bad as we once thought.

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