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Notes From the Field
The Sociology of Conspiracy:
A Cultural Commentary on Structural Adjustment

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Abstract
'Conspiracy theory' as a convenient rhetorical rebuttal has been culturally constructed as quick refutation of otherwise distasteful, never mind factual ideas by the elite. All social interventions that seek structural adjustment, adjustments that have not yet been institutionalized and made 'automatic', involve some form of conspiracy, a coordinated intervention for structure maintenance. In this essay I examine the anti-affirmative action 'movement' in the U.S. that levels the charge of reverse discrimination, to conclude that every extra institutional adjustment involves conspiracy and leads to unintended consequences which require further conspiratorial action by the elite. It is within such elite inspired adjustments to conspiratorial 'side-effects' that trajectories for enhancing human rights can be located.

Those that ascribe blame to the individual for all failings of the system and when opportunities arise for praise, always attribute it to the system as is often witnessed in presentations by the media of mass communication, somehow always become Durkheimian sociologists, social determinists, whenever explanations or facts go against their espoused world view. In trying to perpetuate mythology as 'reality,' they often present it as the only reality and discredit all alternatives as 'conspiracy theories.' Conspiracy theory as a convenient rhetorical rebuttal has been culturally constructed as quick refutation of otherwise distasteful, never mind factual ideas. All social interventions that seek structural adjustment, adjustments that have not yet been institutionalized and made automatic, involve some form of conspiracy regardless of the negative cultural connotations associated with the word, that is they involve a coordinated intervention to bring about some preconceived outcome. All agency-based social change (as against social determinism) necessitates conspiracy that is people's

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inventions and interventions in order to bring about or prevent change, outside the normal workings of social institutions. Proclaiming 'conspiracy theory' in order to socially control ideas due to their potential for disrupting a system is a form of (intellectual) medicalization, culturally deployed by the elite and their media which seek to pathologize alternative viewpoints. As a check on all critical thinking, such labeling attains widespread circulation within the mass society including intellectual circles, where dominant ideas become canonized as 'fact' and all alternatives are termed 'conspiracy theories' thereby effectively (and quite ideologically) blocking the progression of knowledge.

Conspiracy is not the modus operandi of the U.S. elite, the institutional structure at their command operates *sui generis* to reproduce the system it is designed to maintain, with minor glitches that social control agencies like law enforcement can take care of. Such is the state of affairs in normal times. The meetings in dark rooms where policies get constructed and exceptional people chosen, made or broken, becomes a necessity only in times of crisis. Nothing brings the power elite together as a *status group* than when their class structure and its projected ideology are threatened by extinction. The anti-Affirmative Action "conspiracy" (involving the charge of reverse discrimination by white males in the U.S.) was a similar kind of construction in response to an anticipated breach in racial boundaries. It had ulterior system stabilization motives lurking behind its construction.

The U.S. power elite's 'racial project' post World War II involved splitting the underlying class structure within a capitalist society into two in order to mitigate the effects of class conflict. Race was a social construction, a socially defined fiction patched upon the underlying relationships of capitalist production. The undoing of racial and gender divisions as remnants from an old order was a *fait accompli* as capitalism advanced from laissez faire towards an advanced monopolistic form due to the inherent costliness of such divisions for capitalist accumulation.[1] Such old-time grafts from a dead feudal order were retained through structural manipulation in the form of a split labor market (Bonacich, 1976). In other words, the cultural lag was given added life by its translation into material reality through societal restructuring post World War II, in order to prevent another Great Depression.

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The power elite-sponsored U.S. 'racial project' post World War II required that all whites within the U.S. be collected within a single white category, a state sponsored pan-ethnic project, which involved those Europeans previously considered non-white in the U.S. to be institutionally separated from blacks and included within a single white ethnic group through structural assimilation .Whites were deculturized and deethnicized, through programs like the GI Bill, from which blacks were excluded in the most part. Together with white upward mobility post World War II, and the creation of a new middle class, which was a whites-only affirmative action program (Katznelson, 2006), segregation was implicitly enforced through redlining of black neighborhoods which made loans for home repair and buying impossible, supplemented by practices of the Federal Housing Administration.

Destruction of ethnic European neighborhoods whose residents were allowed a one way move to the suburbs (Jones 2003), a move denied in total to blacks further strengthened racial boundaries. Therefore, before it got institutionalized in the workings of U.S. society and the world (as a result of U.S. domination of the global system), these new racial formations were a conspiracy *par excellence*. A very close international parallel to what happened within the U.S., authored by the same elite, was the development of war-devastated European nations through Marshall Aid and favorable trade terms based on industrial output (the international extension of this 'racial project') by the U.S, from which the non-white nations of the world were largely excluded (Eichengreen et. al, 1992), leading to 'active retardation' (to use Wallerstein's term) of the Third World (Skocpol, 1984, p. 293).

The anti-Affirmative Action 'conspiracy' became necessary as extra institutional adjustment, because in trying to control the push for change due to the Civil Rights Movement, the power elite were forced to institutionalize a symbolic change, which drove the movement's force into benign directions. However, this symbolic change had unintended consequences - that white supremacy was no longer considered 'normal.' White identity, the taken-for-granted ideal was at least symbolically exposed to being considered one of many other identities. Equal opportunity now, mostly symbolically (even though still favoring white males), required that the normal compete with the 'other' for the same spot. It also meant that in a few instances, and in

a very few number of cases of fair competition, that blacks and women outdid white males which caused an identity crisis among them, throwing white male supremacy into question, a crisis far surpassing the few who were affected by it. Such an identity crisis if left uncorrected would damage racial boundaries and their functional necessity for the elite, by having the white majority identify with the system while coercively controlling the 'other' (blacks and women), and so a need was felt for 'conspiracy.'

The many manipulations that have co-opted the narratives and terminology of the resistance movements (based on gender and race), have involved the obfuscation of the 'enemy,' the real enemy is deliberately enshrouded in mystery to mitigate conflict. In classical patriarchal societies the oppression of women is overt and explicit, they therefore know who their enemy is and can direct their resistance towards him with greater effectiveness. Thus, the potential for real liberation is much greater in such societies. In the U.S. on the other hand, oppression of women is more covert and implicit, especially after "liberation" was commodified, co-opted and everything that benefited men (including women's dress norms) were repackaged as (system sponsored) 'liberation achieved' (even though the ERA[2] was made to fail). Women were 'liberated' from the family by being allowed into the labor force (on unequal terms), even though such 'liberation' did not absolve them of the 'double shift' or segregation into sectors that were a natural extension of their family roles (Schofield and Helmbold, 1989). Women were also paid less and given custody and responsibility for children (in most single custody cases[3]), thereby further disadvantaging them in the labor market and ensuring that they (and not men) 'do' family (Nelson, 2006). This reinforces their socially ascribed master status based on reproductive labor, a state sponsored 'conspiracy' in order to maintain gendered divisions.

By lowering the status of the family and as a result cheapening sex, the already low status of women based on motherhood norms and sexuality was further lowered without any corresponding equal opportunities created in the labor market (Hochschild, 1983). Motherhood and sexuality have been cheapened through commercial uses of these (limited) aspects of the woman's identity (which is by default generalized to their entire being) in advanced capitalism. Since everything else about women is considered inconsequential as a result, thereby implic-

itly veiling them, women are prevented from self realization. By displacing women's self realization towards the marketplace as consumer (Horowitz and Mohun, 1998), identity ambivalence is manipulatively geared towards bourgeoisie profitability and household dependency on wasteful consumption. This means that the governmental (U.S.) 'aid' that resulted in the subsidized middle class arising in the first place, is paid back to the bourgeoisie multiple fold due to the formation of consumption habits that were conspiratorially ingrained through objectively produced culture (much like U.S. 'aid' to Third World nations flows back to the U.S. with added premium). Objective culture is communicated through the media of mass communication, mediated through the world of celebrities[4] and sets identity standards for both men and women. Women therefore cannot locate the enemy anymore, in fact they embrace and try to emulate the enemy and as a result they either blame themselves or attack their own kind, other women (similar to black on black violence) for personal troubles that are system caused.

Management of alienation, the motor behind social revolutions through preventing class consciousness is an active intervention based manipulation ('conspiracy') of the power elite. The manifestation of this active intervention involves (using Omi and Winant's [1986, 1994]) conceptualization) gender, racial and national formations that vary in content and form with time being constantly invalidated by the foundational relationships of production under capitalism, relationships that involve class alone. This management of divisive meanings is done for one prime reason in advanced capitalism, for social movements that seek Human Rights, this point is of utmost importance: If social divisions based on devalued master statuses (of race, gender and nationality) were to fail, the residual anxiety in a capitalistic society would inevitably lead to focused class conflict, which eventually would lead to the system's downfall.

The elite use 'conspiracies' in order to prevent systemic collapse during crises. These manipulations involve working outside the dictates of an institutional order (Mills, 1956, p. 25) and therefore creating unintended consequences within an existing structure. In trying to patch up a dying order, altering the meaning and definitions behind relationships, including instituting superfluous social divisions upon a capitalist structure,[5] relationship content and form gets successively

redefined. Every time meanings are altered they lead to interactional effects, opening up space for societal change by loosening people's consciousness. These adjustments or "conspiracies" represent structural openings, a narrow gap is created between the structural past and the forthcoming structural future. In order to facilitate class consciousness to lay the foundations of a humanitarian society, social movements should exploit this gap and try to extend the transition period before the 'conspiracy' gets institutionalized.

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Endnotes

1. During times of economic boom as during World War 2, racial and gender divisions get successively undone due to market pressures, revealing this 'fait accompli'.

2. Equal Rights Amendment, an amendment proposed to the U.S. constitution that guaranteed equal rights regardless of sex difference failed to get ratified before its 1982 expiration in the United States.

3. 82% of single parent households in the U.S. are headed by women (U.S Census Bureau, 2003. http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-553.pdf, retrieved 5/22/2010).

4. 'By the sound of their voices, it is evident that they have been trained, carefully yet casually, to be somebody.' (Mills, 1956: 93)

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