

# Voodoo Histories: Aaronovitch on Conspiracy Theories (Polis lecture and book review)

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/04/29/voodoo-histories-aaronovitch-on-conspiracy-theories-book-review/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/04/29/voodoo-histories-aaronovitch-on-conspiracy-theories-book-review/)

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So there I am in a Bolivian bar by the banks of an Amazonian tributary talking to my brother about life and the universe when suddenly he comes out with it. “Of course, Bush did it.” “Did what?” “You know, 9/11”.

I nearly drop my beer. I have not always seen completely eye to eye with my brother on politics, but he’s never said anything like this before. But what really upset me was that someone who certainly cares about the real world, and who wants to change it, should have bought a one way ticket to what a mainstream media person like me would describe as fantasy island. How does that happen?

 Some answers emerge from David Aaronovitch’s [Voodoo Histories](#), a chronicle of past conspiracy theories, and a dissection of the motives of those behind the many that currently thrive. As the [Times columnist](#) points out, conspiracy theories let the real villains off the hook and allow the public to avoid the real politics. [\[Aaronovitch speaks at the LSE on May 7th\]](#)

I mean, why would George W Bush go to all that trouble to bring down the Twin Towers, with all the risk of exposure, when the USA has happily invaded all manner of countries with the flimsiest of excuses (WMD anyone?).

‘VooDoo Histories’ is a tour de force. Aaronovitch takes us through, in great detail, conspiracy theories of the past from the Protocols of Zion through the Stalinist Purges onto the Kennedy Assassination and up to date with Diana’s death, 9/11, 7/7 and, of course, the death of David Kelly.

## Crackpot theories

I confess that some of this detail can be a trifle heavy-going. Why does Aaronovitch spend so much time outlining and then refuting these crackpot theories? Well the answer is in the conclusions he draws. The real meat of this book is not so much the corrective narratives. Although they are useful. Carry a copy of this book with you, it’s the antidote to any bar-room paranoic. No, the interesting bit is where he pieces together the political patterns that make up conspiracy theories.

At this point there is a heavy flavour of Aaronovitch’s own personal narrative, his family’s Communist history and his Jewish background. The latter makes him particularly sensitive to the recurring anti-semitic theme in conspiracy theories. He is, perhaps, a little too eager to relate it to contemporary Arab prejudice against Jews. That, I feel, is often grounded in a virulent political ideology that needs little support from conspiracy theories. Likewise, his cynicism about the way totalitarian politicians of Left and Right have employed conspiracy theories. It can obscure the fact that Fascist and Communist ideologues were repellent for their real politics, never mind their conspiratorial fantasies.

## Deeper Dangers

But Aaronovitch’s book has a more serious purpose than to simply disprove these barmy theories. He is warning of deeper dangers:

*“If all narratives are relative, then we are lost. Widespread anti-Semitic fantasies may have reflected the plight of Germans, may even have been their ‘soul’s version of the truth’ in the post 1918 period, but they were still fantasies and the failure to counter them, or to see the fantasies as themselves creating terrible political realities, proved catastrophic.”*

So in a sense he is suggesting that as a liberal democratic society we are in danger of developing a discourse of 'counter knowledge' where to be 'clever' is to be 'sceptical' and to disbelieve the obvious truth in favour of what panders to our prejudices.

## A conspiratorial culture

Aaronovitch claims there is a contemporary conspiratorial culture. He doesn't blame it on the Internet (which is a relief) but he does think it is rooted in our individualistic social structures. Old Politics was contained in groupings such as unions or parties, it was characterised by ideological or class affiliation. But:

*"The 9/11 movement, as it calls itself, obeys none of these rules. It is composed of people whose other interests are so diverse, from Buddhism to nativism, as to defy any categorisation."*

However, as Aaronovitch shows through careful digging, these movements are not without connections. The same old names and cliques of bogus experts and semi-disguised obsessives such as Lyndon LaRouche keep cropping up. The Internet allows them to mutually support each other and weave a digital web that gives the appearance of substance. They self-reference and replicate themselves, even after the last shred of their battered dreams has been torn asunder by reasoned exposure.

## Nasty and Dangerous

But Aaronovitch stops short of dignifying the conspiracists with a conspiracy theory to explain their existence. In the end these nasty and dangerous fantasies are driven by warped human needs. They are fuelled by fear, hysteria and a kind of paranoia that may be 'a defence against indifference, against the far more terrible thought that no one cares about you.'

In a sense, Aaronovitch argues, conspiracy theories are comforting. They make people feel that someone is paying attention to them and that everything can be explained with their special knowledge.

## The Ultimate Paradox

And that is the ultimate paradox of this book. It disproves the theories. It slaughters the theorists. But even if they read this book it won't change their minds or diminish their popularity. 'Voodoo Histories' is really aimed at the rest of us. Understand what is happening to rational discourse in our post-modern world and worry. And act. Speak out. Or before you know it, the Creationists, the 9/11 Truth movement, the anti-MMR brigade and the rest of the rag-tag irrational army will have taken over.

(For you conspiracists out there, David has admitted that "[Most of us are Freemasons in one way or another](#)". And so I should declare that I once worked with David at the BBC and we both attended youth camps run by the same [socialist-inspired organisation](#))

 [Voodoo Histories, David Aaronovitch, \(Jonathan Cape\) May 2009](#)

David Aaronovitch is speaking at the LSE on May 7th. [Details here.](#)

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