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False flag operation in context of conspiracy theory as a myth which legitimizes actions of ruling class

Abstract

The main aim of the text is to discuss a conception of conspiracy theory as narration which draw a parallel with gossip and urban legend as far as its features and functions are concerned. The author chooses the example of the false flag operation which concerns September 11 attacks and describes it as a unique category of myth which legitimizes actions taken by – for instance – the ruling class. The author builds her conceptual frame on the Malinowski's theory of myth and its function – she tries to prove that it can be still valid in contemporary anthropology.

Keywords: false flag, false flag operation, conspiracy theories, myth, ruling classes, ethnology, cultural anthropology, media, functionalism, Bronislaw Malinowski, narrations, gossip, urban legend, Peter Joseph, *Zeitgeist*, The Venus Project, Jacque Fresco, 9/11 attacks, *liliiu*

If you have studied ethnology, there comes a time when someone asks: “What will you do after graduation?”, “Who is an ethnologist and what does he do?”, “How is ethnology useful?”, “Is it needed?”. The history of ethnological thought shows us a lot of examples which exhibits ethnology or cultural anthropology as worthless or, in the best case, just less valuable science than natural sciences. Flagship theoretical orientations appear to us usually from the perspective of the inhabitants of tropical areas. This leads to the fact that the student of ethnology cannot answer such elementary questions like the ones I just quoted above. But even if foundations of ethnological schools grew on a tropical ground, we can discover that they are suitable for use in our reality anyway. The only thing you need to do is just look around you to see what ethnology can do even in our own backyard, but not only. Through mass media we can successfully analyze a phenomenon which is taking place on another continent, which does not concern us or concerns us to a small extent.

In this essay, therefore I am going to show the ability to analyze the conspiracy theories by using the theory which is the functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski. As part of this consideration I will focus on one type of conspiracy theory, namely the false flag operations theory. I shall make an analysis of this phenomenon on the chosen example, which I will discuss in a moment.

It is not my intention to convince anyone that incidents of which I will talk about were really the operations carried out under the false flag. I also will not prove the authenticity of information that may prove the existence of secret operations recognized by societies dealing with conspiracy theories. What will be important for me is a function (according to the theory of false flag) which is to serve the project, regardless of the actual origin. This is consistent with the assumptions of Bronisław Malinowski. The subjective aspect of a studied phenomenon was very important to him (Nowicka 1991: 30-31).

Before the occurrence of the possibility of using Bronisław Malinowski's theory of needs (because it is crucial here), I will discuss the concept of narrative (which after all is everything a conspiracy theory is about). In fact, I will discuss some of its specific types.

Today, there are narratives about which functions we do not think, even if we are using them or they are concern us. We tell them, not realizing why we do it or what will be the consequences of such action. Here we are dealing with an unconscious realm. These narratives are for example: gossip, urban legend and, of course, conspiracy theories.

Gossip is false or deformed information concerning a person or event. An object of a given gossip automatically becomes more recognizable (Sztalt 2009). The sociological literature describes a gossip as a means of social control. According to Peter Berger, without social control there can be no society, and that social control takes place at various levels of life. At the level at which human life takes place, in groups where everyone knows everyone personally, and is related to a sense of personal loyalty to others, we are dealing with the mechanisms of ridicule, persuasion, contempt or precisely gossip. The measures of social control are used to bring insubordinate units to regularity. Gossip is most effective in small communities where man leads their life openly, as if under the supervision of immediate environment (Berger 2002: 70-74).

Folklore studies in the last two decades of the twentieth century began to explore urban legends. These explorations not only introduced some fresh approaches to the mentioned studies (up to this point it has not been studied narrative texts), but also showed a specific way of urban legends' existence, and most of all, it drew attention to their specific role in society. They affect whole communities. They are the actual messages, they are spontaneous, engage the emotions and force to react. Urban legends are supposedly true stories about special events. They are a response to our needs of fun. In the initial stage of its operation, however, they are passed as true stories and today, in the era of rapidly reacting media, it is particularly easy to promote a wider spread of this type of narrative (Czubala 2005: 5).

But the media do not only contribute to the distribution of urban legends. For many, the Internet seems to be the most worthy source of information today. What if information disseminated by the media, especially by the Internet, in the public mind seems to expose the actions of ruling classes? What if the steps taken by the authority are presented as actions directed against its citizens? A conspiracy theory, though it may seem absurd for a person with indeterminable faith, works not only within small groups, but perhaps most of all it involves the media and therefore reaches the large number of people. One does not exaggerate by saying that in recent years the popularity of conspiracy theories has greatly increased thanks to the media.

So what is a conspiracy theory? The easiest way is to define it as a belief that a person or a group of people are working secretly (they conspire) in some bad intentions. According to Christopher Hodapp and Alice Von Kannon: “The word *conspire* comes from the Latin word, *conspirare*, which literally means ‘to breathe together’, and probably grew out of the idea of plotters whispering together – there were plenty of plots to go around in ancient Rome” (Hodapp, Kannon 2008: 20). The conspiracy theory may relate to any aspect of life, touching many aspects of both economic and political as well as religious or medical.

As I mentioned, I will focus on one type of conspiracy theory, namely the theory that concerns false flag operations. The name of this phenomenon comes from an old naval term and refers to the fact that the ships were equipped with flags of various countries. Then, if it was necessary, the crew could hide true identity of their ship (Hodapp, Kannon 2008: 137). A false flag operation can thus be described as an action taken secretly (by the government, corporation or organization) for which another group is to blame.

Let’s look at this kind of conspiracy theory and what connects it with gossip and urban legends, which I mentioned earlier. Conspiracy theories are current and spontaneous because they appear rather quickly and concern recent events (how long it works is another matter). Conspiracy theories never go without emotional echoes and often force us to reflections because they relate to special actions. So much for signs of urban legend. As far as relations with gossip are concerned – often there is no empirical evidence to support arguments included in the conspiracy theory, and even if you manage to get some, you can expect a reply as in the case of gossip, i.e. in any such history there is a grain of truth, but is this a proof? Or maybe is it an abuse? It remains in the judgment of recipients. It is certain, however, that an object (person, action) that appears in the conspiracy theory becomes more interesting, intriguing, quite alluring. Everyone is talking about it. As to the extent of a conspiracy theory, of course, it is closer to an urban legend than to gossip.

The history is very rich in events which were or which many believe that have been carried out under a false flag. It is interesting how some events that seemingly have nothing in common the conspiracy theory can be joined together. This theory was presented by Peter Joseph in the film *Zeitgeist* and I would like to follow it in my further considerations. But first, a few words about the movie itself.

Film *Zeitgeist* is very interesting for many reasons, but the most important reason is the fact that the premiere of this movie has not only made a fuss around the events of this kind. It has become a cause of uprising of specific social movement. They call themselves *The Zeitgeist Movement*. Here's how they describe their activities:

The Movement's principle focus includes the recognition that the majority of the social problems which plague the human species at this time are not the sole result of some institutional corruption, scarcity, a political policy, a flaw of "human nature" or other commonly held assumptions of causality (...) Rather, The Movement recognizes that issues such as poverty, corruption, collapse, homelessness, war, starvation and the like appear to be "Symptoms" born out of an outdated social structure. While intermediate Reform steps and temporal Community Support are of interest to The Movement, the defining goal here is the installation of a new socioeconomic model based upon technically responsible Resource Management, Allocation and Distribution through what would be considered The Scientific Method of reasoning problems and finding optimized solutions (...) The Movement is loyal to a train of thought, not figures or institutions. In other words, the view held is that through the use of socially targeted research and tested understandings in Science and Technology, we are now able to logically arrive at societal applications which could be profoundly more effective in meeting the needs of the human population. In fact, so much so, that there is little reason to assume war, poverty, most crimes and many other money-based scarcity effects common in our current model cannot be resolved over time (Official Website of The Zeitgesit Movement).

The premiere of the film took place in 2007 and since then Joseph have made more films. Additionally, the movement is associated with a non-profit organization called *The Venus Project*, which was brought to life by Jacque Fresco, a designer and social engineer. "The Venus Project offers a comprehensive plan for social reclamation in which human beings, technology and nature will be able to coexist in a long term, sustainable state of dynamic equilibrium" (Official Website of The Venus Project). Therefore, we can see that it is a very-well organized venture.

The content of the film largely concerns the conspiracy theory called *New World Order* (the theory claims that large part of important political decisions are made behind the scenes and official leaders are only marionettes and in reality control and power belongs to someone else). Joseph cites some historical facts, for example: the United States joining both World Wars, strengthening support for National Socialism in Germany or U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. According to *New World Order*, a group of influential bankers is responsible for all these activities. They would therefore be false flag operations (*Zeitgeist* 2007).

But there is more. The last incident, about which Joseph tells us, is an incident that everyone knows. That is why it is the best example to explain the phenomenon of false flags. What I have in mind? 9/11 attacks.

Joseph's version of what happened, given a myth (*Zeitgeist* 2007). What is a myth, according to Ryszard Tomicki: First of all, myth is the image or the view on some of the facts of the past, present or future. The most common criterion separating myth from other ideas and views is the objective falsity. Myths are related to a strong, unitary or collective belief in its truth. Thanks to this, myths

function as a factor determining the attitudes and behavior of an individual or the community. Myths affect the perception of reality. In extreme ways, for example of Roland Barthes, the essence of a myth is to transform history into nature. Almost anything can become a myth (1987: 244–247). The concept of myth can be also found in the work of Malinowski. Trobriand *liliu* are the myths that are beginning to function, among others, when a social or moral principle demands an explanation or certificate of authenticity. Malinowski gives as an example a myth about animals (totems) of various clans, which appear in a specific order or broke taboos. It is a myth showing the validity of the prevailing social hierarchy (Malinowski 1990: 309–315).

So let us look at the 9/11 myth as a *liliu*. Joseph opposes, as he put it, the myth and truth:

The 9/11 Myth: 19 hijackers, directed by Osama Bin Laden, took over 4 Commercial Jets with box cutters and, while evading the Air Defense System (NORAD) hit 75% of their targets. In turn, World Trade Towers 1, 2 & 7 collapsed due to structural failure through fire in a “pancake” fashion, while the plane that hit the Pentagon vaporized upon impact, as did the plane that crashed in Shanksville. The 9/11 Commission found that there were no warnings for this act of Terrorism, while multiple government failures prevented adequate defense.

The 9/11 Truth: Criminal Elements within the US Government staged a “False Flag” Terror Attack on its own citizens, in order to manipulate public perception into supporting its agenda. They have been doing these for years. 9/11 was an Inside Job (*Zeitgeist* 2007).

According to functionalism, function helps to maintain the continuity of the institution (Paluch 1987a: 134), i.e. a group of people making and implementing joint actions (Paluch 1987b: 161). In the above example, this can be demonstrated in a simple way. In the context of the film *Zeitgeist* and the theory presented there, we are faced with the following situation. A group of influential bankers (institution) with the myth of 9/11 is implementing (function) activities carried out in order to generate needs which should lead to an increase of their profits. To put it in a way of the authors of the conspiracy theories a group of influential families has led to a terrorist attack, to inaugurate a campaign of fear among the American society. The campaign of fear has resulted in easier manipulation of people. As part of the war with terror, some families have enriched at the expense of many people in the U.S.

This example reveals how valid and universal assumptions of functionalism are, even if they grew on tropical ground, we can use them for research of every aspect of life in every field. It is clear that the concepts used in the past in the functional trend have to be expanded by looking for their applicability in the study of new and actual phenomenon. I hope that the example that I represented can be inspiring for ethnologists. And I hope that it shows that functionalism research positions are still valuable and successfully work in the twenty-first century research field.

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