

The shadow of doubt: The conspiracy theory in the United States

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Today, it is common to find in the media addressing the political life of North American society, reference to conspiracies that attack the government and the foundational supports of the nation, calling for the use of violence and based on elaborate theoretical arguments, which give credibility to the statements that abound on the matter. And even when in several cases, these are assumed as a truth, perhaps it is the doubt what prevails in the collective conscience and in the historical memory of the country.

Although the issue stands out as a matter of immediate attention quite recently, mainly associated with the period in which Donald Trump held the presidency - emerging victorious from the 2016 elections and turning conspiracy into one of the favorites subjects in his speeches, with a strong convening and mobilizing power, like the one that led to the assault on the Capitol -, the truth is that in recent times, within the framework of the campaign that formally began last January, the conspiracy discourse has been revisited.

This is expressed in a disturbing dimension, given the reach in broad social and political sectors, of diverse class composition. Among the bases supporting Trump, we can find workers, workers from rural areas and suburbs, middle classes, business sectors linked to construction, real estate, the energy, financial and military world, mainly white people, adult population, whose level of education is not the highest, belonging to the Republican Party, or at least, sympathetic to it. It is in this sociodemographic range that Trump's rhetoric and actions find echo. Whatever he says or does, he has fertile ground in which a conspiracy theory takes root - as it is called in the political, journalistic, literary and audiovisual narrative -, which endorses the conviction that there is a "deep State" (like a State within the State), which threatens the integrity and authentically American moral tradition. This theory states that it is a movement that puts in jeopardy national security and identity, promoted by a network of pedophiles who profess a satanic cult, led by an elite with a liberal political orientation and linked to the Democratic Party, involved in the pornography and sex trafficking businesses. On this basis, an extremely conservative and extreme right-wing conception is set, which promotes an atmosphere of paranoia, instilling fear in the population and making the use of violence legitimate to confront alleged actions that violate the cultural pattern of the typical way of life in the U.S., based on a sense of ethical puritanism and Protestant religion, of defense and respect for the family.

In a previous work, published recently here in CubaSí, it was pointed out that the trend described was notable nowadays, in the context of what was described there as a culture of intolerance, inherent to the history of the United States, mentioning the prominence achieved by a conspiratorial movement called QAnon, promoted by followers of the former president, saturated with fanaticism, tagged as terrorist by the FBI itself. Through it, the image of Trump is disseminated as the only political force whose leadership could neutralize such perversion. Hence, it is urged to support his option as the Republican Party candidate in next November's presidential race. From this point of view, the alleged conspiracy would be an act of betrayal of the ideals symbolized in the Statue of Liberty, in the nation's inaugural documents,

such as the Declaration of Independence and the Philadelphia Constitution.

Now, what do conspiracy theories consist of, classified interchangeably as conspiracy theories, conspiracies (or, merging that word with paranoia), conspiranoias? In essence, these are conceptual constructions used to explain an event or a chain of events of political, social, economic, religious or historical importance, generated by the secret, hidden, clandestine action of some group. The term "conspire", in English, means "to join secretly an agreement for the purpose of carrying out an unlawful or improper act or to use such means to carry out an unlawful purpose." In Spanish, "conspire" means "to unite against one's superior or sovereign, or to unite against an individual to harm him." The first recorded use of the term "conspiracy theory" dates back to 1909, although it gained greater visibility in the 1960s and was included in the respected Oxford English Dictionary in the late 1990s.

The very definition of the term "conspiracy theory" has been somewhat controversial, and although it is installed in the conceptual apparatus of disciplines such as political science, sociology and international relations theory, it is defined from various angles and with specific nuances, which can be overlooked. The fundamental thing, as already said, is that they formulate hypotheses about certain events, phenomena or historical events whose historical knowledge is incomplete, assuming that they are or have been caused by mysterious hidden conspiracies, stealing evidence or leaving false clues in the process.

Conspiracy theories should not be confused with actual conspiracies, proven historically and judicially, punished by criminal laws and court rulings. When speaking of "conspiracy theory", it is intended to mean that the explanation provided about the process in question lacks rational and evidentiary support. Hence, they are often not taken seriously, because, on occasions, many of them, almost by definition, lack verifiable evidence, remaining more in the realm of media speculation and popular commentary than in that of historical or political research.

However, although the repercussion of the conspiracy theory is now gaining momentum, it is already present in the press and in intellectual discussion and it could be said that it is even becoming popular, to the extent that it appears in surveys as an issue of concern to public opinion. As a result, it is far from being something new in the North American society. The truth is that, and do not lose sight of it, the United States is a country that, throughout its history, both distant and recent, vibrates under the impact of short-term episodes, of events, often ephemeral, that are manipulated and magnified by the media, feeding a culture of frivolity, banality, immediacy, lacking responsible analytical and informative depth. Hence it is appropriate to go back to memory.

The theory, or more accurately, conspiracy theories, have recurring appearances in the political evolution of that country. They emerge in certain circumstances, marked by national trauma, with generally tragic connotations or great sensitivity for the nation. They hog the spotlight, they are the subject of essays, books, documentaries, films and television series. They last for a while, until they do not, and consequently disappear from political language, from reports and editorial pages, as something cyclical. A quick look back makes it clear.

In such cases, today, as yesterday, the situation is not determined by certainty, but by the shadow of doubt. Perhaps the most debatable aspect of a conspiracy theory has been and is deciding its veracity. The assertions and accusations regarding particular incidents attributable to conspiratorial actions vary widely in their plausibility, with the fact that they are not supported by evidence that definitively verify the existence of a plot or the machinations involved being appreciated almost as a constant. To illustrate the latter, let's use a resource that always helps out: going to some examples.

Going back in history, with a logic that moves from the present to the past, the most graphic refers to a first reference: that of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when commercial planes, with passengers on board, of American Airlines, were kidnapped by the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda targeting, in suicidal acts, the Twin Towers in New York and one of the facilities of the Pentagon or

Department of Defense, in Washington. Beyond the fact that the aforementioned organization took responsibility for the incident, and that government investigations and reviews carried out by independent institutions have rejected these theories, its promoters and defenders claimed that there were inconsistencies in the commonly accepted version, evidence that was ignored or overlooked or even that specialized entities, such as the FBI and other related entities, in collusion with the presidency, had intentionally silenced objections or hidden evidence. Among the arguments, they pointed out that there was prior knowledge on the part of the government, based on reliable information, of the attacks among the highest level leaders and officials, whose passivity in not taking measures to prevent or avoid the attacks reflected that they acted as accomplices of the conspiracy, by doing nothing or even deliberately helping the terrorists.

Among the most prominent conspiracy theories at the time was that the collapse of the Twin Towers was the result of controlled demolitions, and that they did not respond to the planes' impact, the explosions both caused, together with the intense fire. Moreover, the fact that the Pentagon building was hit by a guided missile launched by the US Air Force itself, and not by a commercial plane, which was an action like scenery, which sought to leave false evidence.

However, despite the profuse presentation of supposedly rigorous analyzes that supported this possibility, the Commission created to investigate the facts, made up of personnel from the government and from private scientific and academic institutions, which included civil engineers and architects, supported by the community of specialized professional, accepted that the attacks of the planes at high speeds, in combination with the subsequent fires, led to the collapse of both buildings. The term inside job has been used to refer to theoretical attacks.

The two aforementioned expressions share the hypothesis that it was self-aggression, and suggested the possible existence of a State within the State, of very deep contradictions in the interests of government elites related to spaces of power, although not coinciding with Trump and QAnon-style interpretations of what they understand as a "deep

state.”

A second reference, probably less known or remembered, but shocking, that fueled conspiracy theories between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, that is, for a period of more than 15 years, was that concerning a series of terrorist dynamite attacks sent as letter bombs, by mail and parcel services, to universities and airline offices. The author, Theodore John Kaczynski, was registered by the FBI in its investigative file, before knowing his identity, as Unabomb, a term defined when referring to the case as University and Airline Bomber, which led the media to refer to him as the Unabomber, who believed that the technological development of North American society promoted by government public policy and private entities, had harmful effects on civilization. Philosopher, mathematician and professor, neo-Luddite (convinced of the validity of the old nineteenth-century British Luddite anarchist movement, which destroyed looms and textile machinery, a practitioner of the so-called technophobia), he lived in a cabin without electricity or running water, in some remote lands in the state of Montana, where he began learning survival techniques and practicing food self-sufficiency. To give you an idea of his scope, between 1978 and 1995, Kaczynski sent 16 bombs to different targets of entities such as those mentioned, which ended the lives of 3 people and injured 23 others. His case grabbed headlines in prominent newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, which even published a manifesto he wrote, arguing the reasons that inspired his attacks on facilities that threatened the best of the nation.

Continuing the retrospective exercise, a third event further in time, of which its sixty anniversary was commemorated in 2023, revived the conspiracy theory that it fostered: the assassination in 1963 of President John F. Kennedy, mortally wounded in the head with two shots, before which the famous Warren Commission, created at the request of his successor in the White House, Lyndon B. Johnson, and was named that way as the man who presided over the U.S. Supreme Court at that time, Earl Warren, concluded that It was an individual act, that of a troubled young man named Lee Harvey Oswald, who fired rifle purchased by the mail and was solely responsible for the crime. Such a call was never sustained in the eyes of the general public or numerous

investigations carried out by exponents of investigative journalism and specialists in North American political history, which showed data that confirmed the actions of more than one shooter, based on the examination of the wounds caused by the projectiles in the crime victim, which did not fit the single-shooter explanation, provided analysis that suggested the existence of a conspiracy. That Commission's report was contradicted by the House Committee on Assassinations, established in 1976, which in its final report concluded that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

Finally, and going much further back in time, a fourth case - probably the first of its kind in the history of the United States - would lead to the existence of a conspiracy, which would blur some of the arguments that were formulated as official. This is another assassination: the one involving Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of that nation, in 1865, ending the Civil War, whose axis was the conflict between the anti-slavery, industrial and protectionist north and the cotton, agro-exporting and free-trading south, generating of the confederation, engaged in achieving secession. Lincoln was fatally shot in the head while attending a theater performance in Washington. According to the conspiracy theory that gained strength and has been accepted by most historians, one of two things could have happened, both expressive of a conspiracy.

The first version: the author of the crime, John W. Booth, an actor sympathetic to the Southern Confederate cause, resentful of Lincoln for having approved the abolition of slavery, planned the action barely in coordination with a small group of close accomplices, carrying it out, mainly, alone. The second: Booth was the manipulated instrument of a larger conspiracy. In this regard, a consensus is recorded in the historiographic literature, which points to the role of an entire plot hatched by the leadership of the confederate forces, whose plan was hatched within the president's own circle, with the support of powerful economic groups influential at the time in American society - such as the group of international bankers known as the Rothschild family - in alliance with disaffected sectors of the north of the country and even with the Catholic Church. These interpretations lack verified evidence, but all speak of how old the idea of the existence of conspiracy theories

is, which, although without certainty, leave a trace in history and memory, up to the present, the shadow of doubt.

It seems that, in the background, at the base of the conspiracies involved in the cases cited and in others, operate, on one hand, dissimilar fractions of the dominant classes, sometimes expressing intra- or inter-class struggles, and on the other hand, marginal groups, who do not have much political or economic capital, but with a desire for prominence, linked to aspirations aimed at moving up in the country's social pyramid, or to resentments, defined by the interest in recovering positions from which they were displaced. In one way or another, the actions, narratives, expectations and illusions of the promoters of real or apparent conspiracies that violently confront leadership and state or governmental structures are defined as struggles for spaces of power or a struggle to achieve a sense of justice. In their core, the common denominator lies in the questioning and even the elimination of enemies, whose image is criminalized or demonized, because they are considered to affect the well-being of society. In my opinion, what is described reflects the crisis - that is, the decay and decomposition - of the system that sustains it.

It is likely that these reflections presented, rather than clarifying, make the panorama darker. In any case, we will have to closely follow the development in the very near future of the internal scene in the United States, beyond Trump - who is nothing more than a result and expression of that crisis -, penetrating into the dilemmas and alternatives that nation face.

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