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How and How Not to Question the “Mainstream Narrative”

Kevin Carson

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In the unlikely event that anyone reading this is unfamiliar with him, Russell Brand is a one time more-or-less leftist who, like Naomi Wolf, has gone down the rabbit hole of batshittery (he endorses the “Great Reset” conspiracy, among other things). Rape accusations against Brand have provoked howls all over the nuttier right-wing websites and social media accounts that “They” are coming for him because he “challenged the mainstream narrative.”

For example the Big Dog of conspiracists, Alex Jones, observes: “And now because he comes out against Big Pharma, he comes out against the globalists, he comes out against the New World Order, suddenly the allegations are happening to him.”

Tucker Carlson, a favorite of fascists and tinfoil hats alike, notes similarly: “Criticize the drug companies, question the war in Ukraine, and you can be pretty sure this is going to happen.”

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Ian Miles Cheong — not only an outright fascist, but an inveterate liar whose word is taken as gospel by the same people who follow Andy Ngo and Dinesh D’Souza — dramatically proclaims:

They came for Tucker Carlson because he spoke the truth.

They came for Joe Rogan because he had conversations about the truth.

They came for Jordan Peterson because he challenged their lies.

They came for Julian Assange and Edward Snowden because they revealed the truth.

They came for Elon Musk because he allowed the truth to be spoken.

Now they’ve come for Russell Brand because he’s showing others that it’s possible to engage with the truth by asking questions.

Jimmy Dore, like Brand a figure with a history on the left who tends to seek out red-brown alliances between “socialists” and fascists, and is fond of repeating right-wing conspiratorial tropes, notes that

ever since the British comedian started turning hard against the establishment, exposing the mainstream narrative on COVID, the Ukraine War and empire, the knives have been out for him. And now we know how they plan to get him, with a series of questionable rape allegations emerging from anonymous sources in his distant past.

It was clear “why the establishment would have determined that Brand had to be disappeared from the discourse.”

Brand himself asks, “Is there another agenda at play?” and continues:

Particularly when we’ve seen coordinated media attacks before, like with Joe Rogan, when he dared to take a medicine that the mainstream media didn’t approve of, and we saw a spate of headlines from media outlets across the world, using the same language. I’m aware that you guys have been saying in the comments for a while, “Watch out, Russell, they’re coming for you, you’re getting too close to the truth, Russell Brand did not kill himself!”... It’s been clear to me, or at least it feels to me like there’s a serious and concerted agenda to control these kind of spaces, and these kind of voices, and I mean my voice along with your voice.

Let’s play out that scenario. Leader of THEY: “Russell Brand is getting too close to the truth. He’s questioning the mainstream media narratives we’ve planted about COVID and Ukraine. If he continues to engage the truth and ask questions, he threatens to undermine our globalist New World Order. Should we arrange for him to be Epsteined?”

Mainstream Media Elites: “Let’s not be hasty. Perhaps we can disappear him from the discourse the same way we did Alex Jones and Joe Rogan. Let’s publish an orchestrated story about a series of questionable rape allegations emerging from anonymous sources in his distant past.”

Yes, that sounds like a totally plausible scenario, based on a thorough understanding of history and how human institutions work. Sarcasm aside, the quotes we’ve looked at so far perfectly illustrate the difference between legitimate leftist analysis, and right-wing conspiracy theory.

It’s one thing to question mainstream media narratives based on critical analyses like those of Noam Chomsky and

Edward Herman, who understand how institutional factors and automatic filtering mechanisms work. It's a different thing entirely to question mainstream media narratives because a bunch of right-wing social media grifters and batshit podcasters have convinced you that a cabal of "globalists" who all know the secret handshake get together and decide what the news is going to be.

G. William Domhoff, a sociologist influenced (*inter alia*) by Power Elite theorist C. Wright Mills, assorted Marxists, and New Left revisionist historians, explained the difference between his form of ruling class analysis and the approach of right-wing conspiracists, in a chapter of *The Higher Circles* ("8. Dan Smoot, Phyllis Schlafly, Reverend McBirnie, and Me"). Ultra-conservative conspiracy theorists see history as driven, not by material considerations like class or institutional structure, but by personal cabals (the Rothschilds, the Bilderbergers, etc.) united around esoteric ideologies ("globalism," the "Illuminati," etc.).

As an example of how the two approaches differ, consider the origins of the Federal Reserve. There's a large body of incisive radical analysis of the role central banking plays in capitalism, the emerging need for it once capitalism reaches a certain stage of development, and the influence of leading capitalists in the policy process by which the Fed was created; it includes the work of James Weinstein, Gabriel Kolko, Martin Sklar, Domhoff, and many more. In contrast, there's the popular right-wing trope — which I encountered on Facebook just this past week — that the "central bankers" are at the heart of an ideologically motivated "Marxist" conspiracy to centralize the economy under their control. Needless to say, their understanding of Marx is about equal to their understanding of the function of central banks under capitalism — or to their understanding of how climate change, ballot-counting, or vaccines work, for that matter.

Conspiracies happen. But when they do happen, they're an epiphenomenon or side-effect of institutional structure, not the driving force of history. And they're conducted in a manner that's consistent with the day-to-day mechanics of the actual institutions involved in them. The overwhelming majority of bad things that happen in the world result from the automatic working of incentive structures and institutional decision-making mechanisms, and are carried out by ordinary people shuffling papers from their in-box to their out-box so they can get home to their families.

As anarchists, we want to change the world. But in order to change the world, we have to deal with the actual world we live in — not a cartoon.