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the conspiracy theorists

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Retrieved on 26 November 2023 from libcom.org.

Originally published in Shift Magazine.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

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All progressive social movements have dark sides, but some are more prone to them than others. Occupy Wall Street and its spin-offs, with their populist, anti-elitist discourse (“We Are the 99%”) and focus on finance capital, have already attracted all kinds of unsavory friends: antisemites, David Duke and White Nationalists, Oath Keepers, Tea Partiers, and followers of David Icke, Lyndon Larouche, and the Zeitgeist movement (see glossary below).

On one hand, there is nothing particularly new about this. The anti-globalization movement was plagued with these problems as well.¹ This was sometimes confusing to radicals who saw that movement as essentially Left-wing and anti-capitalist; when the radicals said “globalization,” they really meant something like the “highest stage of capitalism,” and so from their perspective, by opposing one they were opposing the other. The radicals often saw the progressives in the movement as sharing this same vision, only in an “incomplete way”—and that they only needed a little push (usually by a cop’s baton) to see that capitalism could not be reformed, and instead had to be abolished.

But for numerous others, “globalization” did not mean capitalism. Just as for the radicals, it functioned as a codeword: for some it meant finance capital (as opposed to industrial capital), while for others it meant the regime of a global elite constructing their “New World Order.” And either or both might also have meant the traditional Jewish conspiracy’s supposed global domination and control of the banking system.

¹ At least one Left group had quit the anti-globalization movement in 1998 because of antisemitism and far Right affiliations; a prominent deep-pocketed funder had close links to a neo-fascist think tank; and neo-Nazi figures both praised the Seattle demonstrations and attempted to glean off the anti-globalization movement after words. Things got so out of hand that a whole new brand of decentralized crypto-fascism crystallized and attempted an entryist maneuver. See my “Re-branding Fascism: National-Anarchism” for more background on this.

Whether they realized it or not, the many anti-authoritarians who praised this “movement of movements” as being based solely on organizational structure, with no litmus test for political inclusion, put out a big welcome sign for these dodgy folks. And in that door came all kinds of things, from Pat Buchanan to Troy Southgate.

But still, the anti-globalization movement in the United States was initiated by an anarchist / progressive coalition that in many ways controlled the content and discourse of it, giving it a classic Popular Front feel—the same way the old Communist Parties controlled large progressive coalitions for many decades. In contrast to this, Occupy Wall Street immediately took on a purely populist approach.

There are different ways to understand and oppose capitalism. There is a structural critique, usually associated with Marxism but often shared by anarchism, which seeks to understand the internal dynamics of capital and sees it as a system, beyond the control of any particular person or group. There is also an ethical critique, popular among religious groups and pacifists, which focuses less on the “whys” of capital and instead concentrates on its effects, looking at how it produces vast differences in wealth while creating misery, scarcity, and unemployment for most of the world. Last, there is a populist vision, which can transcend Left and Right. Populists have a narrative in which the “elites” are opposed to the “people.”

On one hand, this can be seen as a vague kind of socialism which counterposes the everyday worker against the truly rich. But it also lacks any kind of specific analysis of class or other social differences—the 99% are treated as one homogeneous body. Usually the “people” are seen as the “nation,” and these 1% elites are perceived to be acting against the nation’s interests. From a radical, anti-capitalist viewpoint, this narrative may be wrong and “incomplete,” but by itself is not dangerous. In fact, many progressive and even socialist political movements have been based on it.

various conspiracy theories together. Chapters exist around the world.

But the populist narrative is also an integral part of the political views of conspiracy theorists, far Right activists, and antisemites. For antisemites, the elites are the Jews; for David Icke, the elites are the reptilians; for nationalists, they are members of minority ethnic, racial, or religious groups; for others, they are the “globalists,” the Illuminati, the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons, the Federal Reserve, etc. All of these various conspiracy theories also tend to blend in and borrow from each other. Additionally, the focus on “Wall Street” also has specific appeal to those who see the elite as represented by finance capital, a particular obsession of the antisemites, Larouchites, followers of David Icke, etc. “The Rothschilds” are the favorite stand-in codeword of choice to refer to the supposed Jewish control of the banking system.

Much has already been said about the Occupy movement’s refusal to elucidate its demands. On one hand, this has been useful in mobilizing a diverse group of people who can project what they want to see in this movement—anarchists, Marxists, liberals, Greens, progressive religious practitioners, etc. On the other hand, this has been useful in mobilizing a diverse group of people who can project what they want to see in this movement—Ron Paulists, libertarians, antisemites, followers of David Icke, Zeitgeist movement folks, Larouchites, Tea Partiers, White Nationalists, and others. The discourse about the “99%” (after all, these Right-wingers and conspiracy mongers are probably a far greater proportion of the actual 99% than are anarchists and Marxists), along with the Occupy movement’s refusal to set itself on a firm political footing and correspondingly to place limitations on involvement by certain political actors, has created a welcoming situation for these noxious political elements to join.

So far, the overwhelmingly progressive nature of many of these Occupations has kept this element at bay. But it is only the weight of the numbers of the progressive participants that has done this. There are neither organizational structures

within the Occupy movement, nor are there conceptual approaches that it is based on, that act to ensure this remains the case. So it is not unreasonable to expect that, especially as participation declines, some of the Occupations will be taken over by folks from these far Right and conspiratorial perspectives. All participants might rightly see themselves as part of the 99%. The real divisive question will then be, who do they think the 1% are?

POLITICAL GLOSSARY

Buchanan, Pat (US): Paleconservative politician who has run several high-profile campaigns for President. A Christian nationalist, he opposes globalization and relies on racist, anti-semitic, and homophobic worldviews.

Duke, David (US): Media-savvy founder of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. He was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives as a Republican in 1990 but lost his bid for US Congress. Duke stresses antisemitic theories about Jewish control of the Federal Reserve and the banking system, and has endorsed the Occupy movement.

finance capital vs industrial capital: Populism often depends on the producerist narrative, which pits “unproductive capital” against “productive” capital. Unproductive capital refers to industries which are based on the manipulation of abstractions (banking), versus the production of physical objects (factory work). The Nazis relied on this distinction for their “National Socialism.”

Icke, David (UK): A former Green Party-leader-turned-conspiracy theorist who blends numerous different conspiratorial ideas together, including antisemitic ideas. He claims that world leaders are Reptilian aliens who appear to be humans, and feed off negative human energy. He has followers on both the Left and Right.

Larouche, Lyndon (US): A former Trotskyist who founded a Left-wing cult around himself and then quickly transformed it into a far Right political organization with a focus on intelligence gathering. He is an antisemitic nationalist who attacks finance capital and globalization.

Oath Keepers (US): Right-wing organization of current and former military and law enforcement members. Descended from the Militia movement, they pledge to disobey certain federal orders that are perceived to violate the Constitution.

Paul, Ron (US): Republican Congressman from Texas who is currently seeking to be his party’s 2012 presidential candidate. He has libertarian economics and isolationist politics; he opposed the US invasion of Iraq but also wants to withdraw from the UN. Favors drug legalization and dismantling the Federal Reserve. Has support from some White Nationalists as well as some progressives.

Southgate, Troy (UK): Former National Front activist who founded National-Anarchism, a form of decentralized crypto-fascism which attempted to infiltrate the anti-globalization movement.

Tea Party (US): A Right-wing populist movement that has affected the US political landscape. It has no clear focus but a mass base and deep funding from wealthy Rightists. Islamophobes, ‘Birthers’ (who claim that President Obama was born in Kenya and is a secret Muslim), and White Nationalists can be found in these circles.

White Nationalists: A catch-all term for various far Right politics whose central concern is the “preservation” of people of European descent (excluding Jews), who are seen as comprising a “nation.” This includes white supremacists, white separatists, and those who work inside parliamentary systems but advocate for “white rights.”

Zeitgeist movement: Technocratic movement which also transcends the traditional Left / Right divide. Founded by Peter Joseph, it originates in a series of movies which blended