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The paper

Recent literature in political theory and intellectual history has shown an interest in the question of how and why critical theory should be distinguished from conspiracy theory. Both modes of enquiry seek to unmask hidden social forces and to alert us to the ways in which the official version of the world we inhabit is not what it seems. Yet one is treated as intellectually respectable and the other is seen as epistemologically suspect, sometimes bordering on the clinically insane. What is the rationale for this distinction? Current arguments tend to focus on the political and social thought of the twentieth century (when the term 'conspiracy theory' gained currency). But absent the terminology, similar questions apply to the radical thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was also concerned with sinister interests, masked power and uncovering a concealed political reality.

This paper explores some of these questions in relation to the thought of Jeremy Bentham, the great 'un-masker' of British political life in this period, who in his writings and his persona displayed many of the characteristics we might now associate both with the critical theorist and the conspiracy theorist. The paper examines Bentham's understanding of the idea of conspiracy and the shift across his career from seeing the failures of the British state as inadvertent features of the system to seeing them as intentional. It will discuss the implications of his ideas about secrecy and subversion for thinking more broadly about transparency, bureaucracy and the relationship between democracy and the power of entrenched elites. Finally it will consider whether it makes sense to call Bentham a conspiracy theorist.

Related literature

Jeremy Bentham, *Works of Jeremy Bentham* (1843), 11 vols. (esp. vol.1 'Fragment on Government' and vol. 3 'Parliamentary Reform')

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H.L.A. Hart, *Essays on Bentham: Jurisprudence and Political Theory* (Oxford 1982)

Volker Heins, 'Critical theory and the traps of conspiracy thinking', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (33, 2007), 787-801

L.J. Hume, *Bentham and Bureaucracy* (Cambridge 2004)

Philip Schofield, *Utility and Democracy: The Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham* (Oxford 2006)

Gordon S. Wood, 'Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century', *William and Mary Quarterly* (39, 1982), 401-441