

The Eye Upon Us Has Turned Upon Them

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I was talking with my brother yesterday about AI. He is a musician so we were working on some tracks, and got into talks about the writer's strike and how some industry execs flirted with the idea of using AI generated content pulled from an artist's likeness, for which the artist would only get one time payment, to use for good. We were going into how labor is the source of value and wealth and that the bosses will invest in technology to better exploit that, but would still always need that human element to steal from. Especially as Black people, whose culture is always treated as a fresh pool to appropriate from, I was expressing that the misuse of AI would impact how our cultural productions are thieved.

Later, my brother hooked me with his VR headset. It was my first time experiencing something like that. I could set a virtual boundary mapped onto the physical space which ensured the visor kept me unaware of the latter. I could see myself in a virtual mirror as my avatar, and move around. There were trees, rocks, a table with food, these beautiful skies, a magnificent orange sunrise. I was amazed but also overwhelmed by the sensory stimulation, so after about five minutes I took the headset off.

We talked about technology of today, like the robot police dogs that was just unveiled. So much of this stuff is creepy, scary, if I'm being real. I'm a Zillennial, in between Millennial and Gen Z, so I came up at the tail end of the analog consumer-to-digital consumer transition. I remember in school they started to introduce us to internet literacy in our classes, and I remember tuning them lessons out because aside from burning CDs and using MySpace, I truly thought a great deal of these technologies would be peripheral to my life. I was bored when they would try to instruct us in proper use of Microsoft Word back then, especially because we didn't have regular computer access in my home for a great deal of my life, even when other people were starting to purchase them. My family used the library for a lot of years to get internet access, so ultimately I did not anticipate how much our lives would be swallowed by technology especially via social media by the time I was in my adolescence. I'm only now beginning to really take into account how vast a shift came especially in the 2010s with social media culture.

As me and my brother talked about these things (and somehow he managed to play from our cousin's P5 through a separate device — these kids yall! And my lil brother had the nerve to say my birth year was mad long ago ☹) — there was a moment when my brother said something interesting.

Basically he had expressed this feeling that these technologies were being rolled out for us step by step, strategically, which was spooky or kinda grim and definitely warranted a lot of skepticism about the government in his mind. My response:

“I actually don’t think it’s this slow, sneaky thing. The internet came out the military industrial complex did you know?”

“Nah, I didn’t.”

“Yeah. It was a discovery, an experiment at first. And quite a few things about this system are like that. Nobody sits around and just plots stuff for the most part. No, it’s different groups and they are after something materially. On one side they gotta steal our labor, on the other side they gotta keep us in place to where they can stop us from messing up the ways they get that out of us. They start to pursue this class interest, and that’s what the government advances. So what began as a surveillance technology is now used by companies as a marketing apparatus. But that later use wasn’t planned in secret from the beginning. It was over time, as social media became the center of public life, that companies found marketing use for something that first originated in the military. The only reason it feels so sudden and orchestrated is because now we are so deep in it that those material pursuits are happening right in front of us, due to the visible nature of these technologies.”

The non-orchestrated view of technology and media is important to me. From Nick Marx’s “Family Guy: Undermining Satire” we learn that even television media execs had to play catch up to the impact that the internet had. With its fast paced, scrolling thru the feed presentation of information, it became more profitable in the 2000s to start introducing a genre of television full of cutaway scenes and quick humorous references to a range of political topics from multiple perspectives. Thus, the “marketplace of ideas” built into the “equal opportunity offender” kind of television and comedy was born. The internet itself wouldn’t exist without the decades long, complicated history of electrical analog and early digital computers, contributions to which are heterogeneous (I have read that there was actually a dispute about who should be considered the inventor). The point I’m trying to make is that viewing these technologies as orchestrated and rolled out steadily and sneakily doesn’t actually reflect the historical process that got us to where we are. And as Black people especially it is important to do this, since our oppressors regularly have to spend time reassessing and revamping in order to surveil us due to the creative ways we resist. If things were all about orchestration, why haven’t they unlocked the “cheat code” regarding our culture?

And to prove that point, my brother did point out how when he first started chatting with his Snapchat AI, there were slang terms his AI didn’t understand. We both agreed that there is stuff about Ebonics that are elusive. I decided to open up my Snapchat and to my surprise, the AI understood some of my slang. My brother remarked:

“It must have learned from other people by now. Maybe instead of calling it artificial intelligence there needs to be a different word for it.”

Interestingly, the AI didn’t understand ballroom ebonics though. And once I peeped, I closed the app because why give it more ammo, right? I said this to my brother. Black unpredictable

need not be captured by pattern recognition software if we don't let it. The magic hands are that of the people.

I'm reflecting on this exchange with my kid brother, and concerns about technology, and insisting on a materialist analysis rather than a "secret, orchestrated plot" view because I see a lot of conspiracism lately. In place of critical understanding of science, people become convinced that especially in these seemingly apocalyptic days, the "unveiling" of well-designed wicked acts is upon us, acts that were steadily in the making for a long time behind the scenes. I have encountered leftists who suggest that this is the case; they want to talk about government experiments like MKUltra as an example, or even the fact that the US feds (Grand Patriarchy, above ground) and drug trafficking lumpencapitalists (Grand patriarchy underground) worked together in destabilizing both lumpenradical movements up here and also in the Global South. But conspiratorial thinking should never be given leeway by a revolutionary/insurrectionary militant, in any way shape or form.

The Counterrevolution of the mid-to-late 20th century and the Cold War overall does involve some degrees of secrecy, but pointing to that fact specifically as the sole or primary explanation for unique, significant historical events is not dialectical. While I am no Marxist (indeed, Marx was not either), Fanon's "stretching" of Marxism and his "sociogeny" approach to science are essential to my thinking about dialectics. And so, I point to Lewontin and Levins' "The Dialectical Biologist" in this age of conspiracism:

"The Marxist-Hegelian idea that qualitative changes could arise from quantitative change ran counter to the mechanistic materialism that predominated in the working ideology of scientists. In the mechanistic world view, changes in position, amount, velocity, and intensity were directly understandable, provided the intermediate stages could be shown, but discontinuous or qualitative change was mysterious. Darwin believed that 'nature does not take jumps.'" (pg 28, On Evolution)

The idea that quantitative changes could "leap" to qualitative changes is elusive to bourgeois sciences, due to a very mechanistic worldview deeply tied to colonialist relationships to nature. The mysteriousness of discontinuity in a process or set of relations is what conspiracy theories strive to "fill the gaps" on. If self-proclaimed leftists are finding certain phenomena to be empirically unique, but lack an explanation with the tools they have at their disposal, this should be treated as an opportunity to get more serious about dialectics and about science. As George Jackson once put it:

"Any explanation for social phenomenon, past, present or future, must present valid arguments and proof. As we travel back into history, honest descriptions and definitions will inevitably overlap. They will differ depending on their geopolitical standpoint. Ideally, they should be colored with as little subjective interpretation as possible from today's world. The present, due to its staggering complexities, is almost as conjectural as the past. We must prove our predictions about the future with action."

For Comrade George, that action is the attack on property by the enslaved, an attack which becomes reformist and thus fascist if it is not dealing with the "classes and individuals who

endorse the present state of property relations or who stand to gain from it” (pg. 8, *Blood in My Eye*). Militancy is the “method” of a “roots-grasping science;” but, those leftists who are tailing conspiratorial tendencies are betraying their orientation towards reform, and fascism. Indeed, the universe will never stop having unpredictables. And so much about our freedom struggle is elusive; no one could have predicted the global reach of the Taylor-Floyd rebellions in 2020. But, the counterinsurgency of today focuses on transmisogynistic narratives about an “attack on women,” itself tied to racist narratives about “white genocide” and to antisemitic/anticommunist narratives about “big pharma” being used to “emasculate” men and thereby destabilize America. Who is often made the face of “big pharma” and scientific-medical technology, furthermore? China or some other Eurasian nation-state.

If we want to understand the “mysterious” jump into a seemingly post-apocalyptic time period, we cannot let obviously right-wing conspiracy theories substitute as Marxism. The gaps in “mechanical” science have to be filled with a genuinely radical analysis.

The first step in transforming the conspiratorial mentality into a roots-grasping mentality is to try and develop a firm grasp of what’s called “contingent” phenomena.

There was a scientist named Stephen Jay Gould. He had some deal of liberal views, but Marxism greatly influenced his approach to biology and his use of biological insights to critique racism in his discipline. The scientists of his cohort of researchers include RC Lewontin, who I cited earlier, among others; they were inspired by the heat of social movements during the mid-to-late 20th century. The formal denaturalization of “race” in the sciences, and even the recent distinguishing of “sex” from gender is in part because of how Black and colonized, women’s, workers’, gay, and disability movements of this time forced practitioners of science to question long held assumptions in their respective bodies of work. It is important to name, furthermore, that some of these “critical” approaches to science are being dismissed by the right-wing counterinsurgency as much as rebellious social movements are. The fascists who created a conspiracy of “great replacement theory” play a key role in the popular misunderstanding of “critical race theory”; they also incorrectly frame CRT as something introduced by RC Lewontin when in reality it was pioneered by Black legal scholars and activists.

And to that point, Stephen Jay Gould, because he was of Jewish background, is often dismissed and his work is triangulated in antisemitic narratives that suggest that Black people’s critical traditions were injected into our heads by white Jewish scientists. The conspiracist cannot fathom that critical theories of science have Black roots, whether in Anténor Fermin’s 19th century text “The Equality of the Human Races,” du Bois’ interventions into what would become sociology, or Fanon’s novel approaches to his practice as a psychiatrist. No, the conspiracist has to suggest that a secret mastermind “rolls out” critical theories in science and imparts them to the Black community. But, let us not dismiss what certain scientists outside our communities have discovered, especially if we know them to have created understanding of objective realities on one hand, and done so in solidarity with our freedom struggle on the other hand. Science is not orchestrated “from above” but rather comes from a very haphazard interplay driven by social actors: the conflict of wills among human beings trying to define and determine the internal and external conditions of their living.

Anyways, Gould defines a contingency as “facts that could not have been predicted,” but which are “empirically unique.” It is important to emphasize that contingencies are fact and therefore objects of empirical study. One should not hastily try to apply the term “contingent

phenomena” to just about any event that the subjective standpoint deems unpredictable. There has to be an objective basis for the assessment.

Gould insists that contingency is a key characteristic of “highly complex systems.”

Gould was trying to address the division between natural science and social science. He was arguing that “the narrative method of historical analysis” in social science and the humanities was stronger than the Cartesian reductive method applied solely to the biological.

He felt a need to improve natural science so that it could adequately and factually explain “large numbers of contingent events” (pg. 224, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Pox*).

An example of a historical contingency he points out I think was like the event that wiped out the dinosaurs. Also, he pointed out 9/11 as an event which could not have been predicted, but which was empirically unique in its occurrence and aftermath. I would say that the early signs of a covid-19 outbreak in 2019 could be viewed as historical contingency too. I’m certain the scientists who found positive results from wastewater samples in Italy could not have anticipated that Wuhan, China would eventually be considered the epicenter of the outbreak, nor that the declaration of “pandemic emergency” in the US would have fueled Qanon conspiracy theories.

The principle of “contingency” is related to Gould’s theories of so-called “emergent phenomena.”

He is keen on insisting that “emergence” doesn’t mean when something appears out of nowhere or spontaneously. This point is essential. There are many New Age spiritualists who use the term “emergence” in an unscientific manner. And this isn’t to say that religious views of spontaneity are invalid (Fu-Kiau demonstrates the scientific importance of Bakongo cosmological views, for example). But everything must be contextualized.

In the secular-sciences, a phenomenon is defined as “emergent” at a certain level of complexity when compared to “lower levels.”

Complexity has to do, if I’m being simplistic, with the number of interactions within and between “parts” of a system, or within and between the qualities/traits/features of those “parts.”

According to Gould, the reductionist (Cartesian) method can only predict events and outcomes to an extent.

Reductionism usually takes a whole/system and isolates its “parts” from each other. It focuses on the traits/qualities/features of those parts, and tries to understand the laws and dynamics that cause those isolated variables.

Gould argues that there are instances where scientists can “recombine” the isolated “parts” of a reduction and successfully predict or anticipate the outcomes that show up when they are interacting as a whole. These are called “linear” or “additive” phenomena.

But Gould also points out how this is not applicable to all things about the universe. He points out how certain interactions cannot be predicted or anticipated “linearly” or “additively.”

The qualities/traits/features that the “parts” have in isolation — and the causal forces at work regarding those variables — are not a 1:1 with what dynamics “emerges” when the parts and whole are viewed in their complexity. These are “non-linear” and “non-additive” phenomena.

This understanding is central to making sense of emergent properties and also of contingent events.

A linear/additive explanation of 9-11 would focus on the neuropsychology of a “terrorist” is the example that Gould points to if I remember correctly.

As far as the mass extinction that killed the dinosaurs. Scientists are still piecing together the puzzle. One explanation is the idea of a meteor hitting. But even then, that alone wouldn’t

explain the whole story. So other scientists would have to look at the possible effects of a meteor on atmospheric conditions. It's because of attempts to "cumulate" answers from understanding of isolated variables that scientific explanation of a historical contingency can have strengths and weaknesses.

This is something a lot of people don't get. So say if an article drops talking about a "new theory" of what happened to the dinosaurs, some people walk away from that concluding that "theory" just means "opinion." And so they'll act as though the existence of dinosaurs isn't fact, or that mass extinction events have not occurred before on account of empirically observable dynamics.

But "novel" theory in this context is really a demonstration of the fact that there was a contingent and emergent event, one which the reductionist method is haphazardly grappling with to explain

When talking about revolutionary struggles, an understanding of emergence, contingency, the reductionist method, and nonlinear/non-additive outcomes is important.

There are objective facts. We know colonialism happened. That is truth. We know climate change is happening. That is a truth. These can be *empirically* explained. The human species experiences the planet and itself in a qualitatively unique way because of Europeans' invasion of every continent. There are observable qualitative differences in air quality and more because of anthropogenic environmental impact.

But a lot of people are skeptical about these things, and will even flatten it all to just subjective "perspective" because there isn't enough adequate narrative-historical and scientific explanations for these objective facts being devised.

Scientists still communicate news about climate change in piss poor ways. Many radicals speak of colonialism as if it was an inevitability (when the "discovery" of the Americas was actually a contingency! And its world historical importance an emergent phenomenon). And therefore, conspiracy theories start to make sense to a lot of people. Many think white supremacy is because of some "deal" white people made with an alien or inhuman force or other; and many believe that ecological devastation is actually "climate control."

Conspiracies are ironic and paradoxical because they appear to bring a *causal explanation* to a wide range of contingent/emergent phenomena. They are quite Cartesian in their underlying metaphysics or worldview, even while claiming to be against mainstream science. They are also quite "critical" in their disposition, even while being anti-critical theory. These paradoxes are part of the appeal. For example, conspiracies tend to assume that technological/scientific success in "lower level" domains automatically must mean that scientists can master the causal forces at "complex levels." So if they can splice genes, that must somehow mean they can control the weather. Surprise, though, cloud seeding is not reliable, since weather patterns are nonlinear/nonadditive phenomena; and even more, one of the earliest attempts at weather manipulation, Operation Popeye, was an attempted Vietnam War project. Causality in the reductionist worldview doesn't cohere; there is a "leap" related to material interests. But the conspiratorial account of those interests is also incoherent.

Because, while the US had a vested material interest in overselling its technological/scientific prowess here, they tried to experiment with cloud seeding to manipulate the *already existing monsoon season*. And this was so that troops on the ground could have a tactical advantage. Did it work? Hell no. And we know that Vietnam is considered the rare instance of a war that the US did not win. Technological mystery has its limits.

And yet, conspiracists take technological overestimation at face value. This is bourgeois propaganda, alongside being unscientific. It obscures the gap between what reductionism can and cannot offer to an understanding of objective realities. It's no surprise that people who believe in weather manipulation will more than likely have capitalist values or petit bourgeois aspirations.

The most troubling aspect of conspiracism is that because it pretends to provide causal explanations, the reductionist presuppositions that guide it (which misapprehend the nature of nonlinear/nonadditive phenomena, contingency and emergence in complex systems) will always take the form of specifically bioreductionist antagonism. Hence, conspiracism and antisemitism, racism, transphobia, etc go hand in hand.

The ppl who reductively traced SARS-COV-2 to Wuhan, China were being sinophobic. Even though there is evidence that traces of the novel coronavirus were being detected in wastewater samples from Italy and one other European country a few months before the Wuhan outbreak. Thus, the conspiracy says the virus was "lab made" and that it's being used to institute a "new world order."

The reality is, however, that as biomes get destroyed by the intrusion of industry, the likelihood of human exposure to "zoonotic" pathogens is raised. It would take a firm science of the complex interactions of our global ecosystem in order to scientifically explain things like a pandemic. This cannot be derived from a linear/additive model.

And as for white genocide? The attack on women? Emasculation of men? Destruction of the US? What's actually happening is that the complex system of cissexism, patriarchy, imperialism, and settler colonialism are being attacked by its victims. The chickens are coming home to roost. The eye upon us, has turned upon them. The scope of the George Floyd Rebellions, the rise of queer liberation in the ashes of the Ferguson Uprising are historical contingencies that can't be reductively explained. The role of social media and Black Twitter in the spread of abolitionist, pro-queer, feminist, socialist ideas in the 2010s must be viewed accordingly. Police brutality had been going down but recordings of Eric Garner's and other brothers' deaths sparked fire in ways the State was not ready for, and around which we see them scrambling.

We must contextualize the Great Upheaval in terms of an overall increase in decolonial/socialist/feminist fervor going back to the 20th century. This was and is an emergent process, one tied to the rich history of what Walter Rodney called "Pan African Revolt" and what Cedric Robinson identified as a "Black Radical Tradition." At a "lower level" of complexity, you can't fully grapple with all the dynamics and causal forces that yield the Great Upheaval. Marxists might try to reduce it to class; the nationalists might try to reduce it to ontology, but "cumulation" from these analyses is always partial at best and exclusionary at worst. The liberals might reduce it to some "outside" influence. And these aren't even partial truths; they are completely fabrications and misapprehensions. Then the "hard" and "social" sciences try to come in, cherry picking data — Moynihan had once blamed the Upheaval on "Black matriarchy" (according to Dr Tiffany Lethabo King). Others are talking about a "criminal pathology" and "epigenetics" to explain the Great Upheaval.

The right wingers are then taking this all and painting a picture of "who, what, when, where, why, how." And the answers are always fascist dogwhistles: Soros, the gay agenda, the Masons, etc. Hence, we need a narrative-historical and ultimately materialist transfeminist alternative to fill in the gaps of science. Conspiracies aren't the way. Oppression is an objective structure, but it neither rests upon nor is propagated by secretive, technical mastery/design. This shit way more complicated than that. You can't "cumulate" adequate analysis off isolated "observations" about

shadow governments, deep states, and secret societies. Radicalism means to grasp things at the root.

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