

ACADEMIC ARTICLES

THE MAINE, THE ROMNEY AND THE THREADS OF CONSPIRACY IN CUBA

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Abstract

What constitutes a conspiracy, and what are the stakes of popular theories of conspiracy? This article addresses these questions through an ethno-historical examination of narratives about conspiracies endured and posited by Cuban people. Long before the Revolution in 1959, continuing through the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, numerous assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, and onward to recent claims of biological warfare orchestrated by the government of the US, conspiracy theories have circulated widely in Cuba and its diasporic enclaves. Drawing on ethnographic and historical data, the article embeds present-day narratives of conspiracy in the longer-run history of Cuban conspiracy theories such as those initially presented in the case of the USS *Maine* and its nineteenth-century precursors, notably including the stationing of the HMS *Romney* in Havana harbour, and the so-called conspiracy of *La Escalera* in 1844. It argues, ultimately, that these tales are always morality tales, counterposing nefarious agents of an illegitimate external power to the imagined community of those (including the narrator's self and audience) thus disenfranchised. In that sense, then, the truth value of any particular account of conspiracy is irrelevant to the larger truth of Empire.

Keywords: Cuba, history, conspiracy, narrative, empire

'Americans', Joan Didion writes, reporting on an incredulous, baffled critique of US society by the Cuban exile enclave in Miami, are 'a people who could live and die without ever understanding those nuances of conspiracy and allegiance on which, in the Cuban view, the world turn[s]' (Didion 1987: 78). Similarly within the Republic of Cuba itself; hardly a day seems to pass in Havana without some story of intrigue and machination, whether over the death of Che, the delayed arrival of the monthly egg ration or as a quite possibly related explanation of the

assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy by mobsters and CIA stooges. Indeed, so many putative conspiracies surround Cuba, on either side of the Straits of Florida, that these theories must not be considered simply in terms of their internal logic or stated objectives. Nor are they a simple, unmediated consequence of a certain state socialist political system: the Cuban conspiracy genre demands attention precisely for its un-remarked ubiquity on and off the island. After defining the term and focusing mainly on conspiracy theory within the Republic, I will argue that narratives of *conspiración* are morality tales, always presented as passionate, principled opposition to imperial machinations, from the colonial margin. Unlike scholars who focus on conspiracy theory as a late modern Cold War phenomena (Marcus 1999), I also argue that, in the Cuban context at least, these are part of a much longer historically and culturally grounded pattern.

Distinguishing Conspiracies

What is a ‘conspiracy theory’, and how is it distinct from a rumour, or indeed, from other explanatory frameworks such as witchcraft? First identified as a distinct genre by Richard Hofstadter in his seminal study, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter 1965), conspiratorial accounts of hidden, nefarious machinations are heard in many everyday contexts in the world today (e.g., Briggs 2004; Boyer 2006; Johnson 2013). Unlike witchcraft beliefs, however, narrative accounts which assert some sort of conspiracy characteristically deploy technical facts and scientific principles to buttress their veracity. In that sense, one might well consider conspiracy theory a highly modernist genre. Note that in trying to make sense of a paranoid style, it is all too easy to look for *function*, or truth value. Academic studies of rumour encounter this difficulty and furthermore tend to reify their analytical unit – in these cases, the ‘rumour’ (Lienhardt 1975; Turner 1993; Stewart and Strathern 2004), at times even subsuming conspiracy theory as a subset of rumour. While *any* term must be treated heuristically, I argue that these two terms only partially overlap: some years ago, Havana went into mourning, falsely believing that Pedrito Calvo, a superstar of Cuban salsa, had died in a fire. And on numerous occasions over the years, rumours regarding Fidel Castro’s death – a preferred prank in Miami and Havana both – have garnered attention in the international media. These rumours may be compelling, even political, but no conspiracy or conspirators are imagined. Conversely, some of what Kapferer (1990) calls ‘rumor’ I would call conspiracy theory (the stories surrounding Kennedy’s assassination, for example).¹ Unlike rumours, conspiracy theories always imply *actors* and *agents*, and not simply *events*, and those agents’ motives are always illegitimate and disenfranchising, from the perspective of the person proposing their theorised conspiracy.



Figure 1 Entering Havana harbour 1898

For the eminent anthropologist George Marcus, the superpower-driven Cold War – itself ‘defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics, and policy’ – was the key context which enabled conspiracy theories to flourish (Marcus 1999: 2). However, I argue that to properly frame conspiratorial narratives, one must examine the deeper historical record. In fact, the tradition of presuming, seeking and encountering conspiracy and imperial intrigue in Cuba precedes the Cold War superpowers by more than a hundred years, on at least two occasions involving the British, Spanish and American great powers of the nineteenth century – most famously over the destruction of the USS *Maine*, an event crucially preceded and set up by an earlier warship and conspiracy, that of the 1840s conspiracy known as *La Escalera*.

Conspiracy Theories through Cuban History

In tracing the long run of Cuban conspiracy, no event is more memorable than the mysterious destruction of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbour in February 1898 (Figure 1). Sent to Cuba at a moment of high tension during the war for

independence, ostensibly to protect American citizens, the *Maine* affronted Spanish ultra-loyalists (Samuels and Samuels 1995: 152). It also arguably provided an appealing target for Cuban insurgents or US interests eager for a pretext for North American intervention.

Its actual destruction on the 15th of February, with the loss of the majority of hands – some 260 men – thus set the stage for theorists of wildly competing conspiracies. To some, particularly among North Americans and Cuban insurgents, it was a plot of Spanish ultra-loyalists. To others, particularly in Spain or among Cuban loyalists, it was a vile insurgent plot to provoke US intervention. Finally, among anti-imperialists and some Cuban *independentistas*, it was a North American-engineered manoeuvre to justify the new American empire and the seizure of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

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But in fact, the *Maine* sailed into a port with a culturally specific experience with foreign warships: not only had the capital port oriented the entire development and history of the colony, but the still keenly remembered insertion of the British hulk, the *Romney*, into Havana harbour from 1837 to 1845 (in a fruitless attempt to curtail the slave trade to Cuba, precisely during the aforementioned conspiracy of *La Escalera*) provided a resonant historical precedent for the Cuban cultural understandings of the intersection of foreign naval power, national honour, conspiracy, and anti-colonial or annexationist intrigue. Thus, let me look back at that earlier context, in order to get at the bigger pattern.

To this day, 1844 is known to Cuban historians as ‘The Year of the Lash’, the year in which thousands of slaves and free blacks and mulattos were savagely whipped, banished, imprisoned and executed by the colonial authorities (see Paquette 1988). It was the culmination of the so-called *conspiración de La Escalera*, or conspiracy of the ladder – a massive slave uprising allegedly planned by British abolitionists and leading free intellectuals of colour. The former British consul, David Turnbull, was convicted in absentia of agitating against the Spanish colonial order and in ‘England’s favor in a struggle for emancipation’ (Paquette 1988: 241), and the renowned *mulato* poet Plácido, among many victims, was shot as a ringleader. In historian David Murray’s view,

... the main target of the Cuban government was the man or men believed to be behind what was universally seen as the abolitionist conspiracy. Even before the investigation had identified those responsible, Captain-General O’Donnell had a moral conviction that the authors were agents of British abolitionist societies. (Murray 1980)

The debate about the actual extent of the *La Escalera* conspiracy or conspiracies has generated a massive historiographical literature among Cuban and non-Cuban historians and intellectuals ever since. While the scope of the planned uprising may never be fully known, the repression which it unleashed is extremely well documented and was of far-reaching consequence for subsequent Cuban race relations and the struggles to end slavery and for national independence. Although overlooked, a foreign warship was a critical component of this struggle and putative site of its conspiracies: From 1837 to 1845, in response to domestic pressure to suppress the global slave trade, and despite repeated protests from the Cuban colonial administration and some white Cuban citizens, the British Navy maintained a ship, the HMS *Romney*, moored in Havana harbour as a refuge for illegally transported African *emancipados*. As a visible reminder of British power during the mid-nineteenth century, the *Romney* thus helps explain how the visit of the USS *Maine* – remember the *Maine*? – may have been reasonably seen as more than a casual ‘affront’, but rather, as the harbinger of another extended occupation.

Thus, from the day of its hurried, tense arrival, the *Maine* signified one thing for US President McKinley (trying for his part to forestall North American war-mongering and resolve domestic political challenges), another for Cuban rebels, and something entirely different, and historically specific, for Spanish authorities. This conjuncture then informed the mutation of a terrible explosion into nothing less than the end of the Spanish Main and the transformation of interventionist North Americans into full-fledged apologists of a new ‘Empire of Liberty’ – an empire which continued to send its warships into Cuban waters well into the twentieth century.

So how have narratives about the *Maine* circulated and changed over time and between interested parties? Here are a few highlights, starting with 1890s-era theories: An anonymous letter written in Cuban-slang Spanish was handed to the 1898 US Court of Inquiry blaming the sinking on a conspiracy headed by one ‘Pepe Taco’ – reputedly the same shadowy figure found assassinated on the 16th of February. William Randolph Hearst and William Astor Chandler were among the alleged financiers of the operation (Remesal 1998: 197). Other theorists blamed a disgruntled officer of the ship on shore leave, or on unspecified Cuban rebels. A number of American and British filibusterers and adventurers such as Charles Crandell and Johnny Dynamite gave the press detailed (if incommensurable) accounts alleging previous employment by the Spanish as explosives experts and unwitting accomplices to the crime. These men each carefully described the mining of the harbour and/or the particular mooring used by the *Maine*, citing different types, deployments and detonation mechanisms of the supposed mine. By some accounts, the harbour was mined in 1896, by others, 1897 or even 1898, just

before the *Maine* arrived. François Lainé, a correspondent for the New York *Sun*, proposed that the definitive evidence for a land-detonated mine was the simultaneous electrical blackout in Havana, caused by the power surge needed to activate the prepared explosive; he also claimed to have seen a letter from Madrid, written by former Captain-General Weyler, urging his supporters in Havana to blow up the insulting warship (for more on these and other accounts, see Remesal 1998: Chapter Five). Alexander Brice, an American resident of Cuba, supposedly warned the US consul about a plot by Spanish officers to sink the ship, and only remained silent, ultimately, at the personal request of President McKinley. The journalist Indalecio Sánchez Gavito also noted other possibilities, including an accidentally exploded American torpedo, or the explosion on board of arms destined for the Cuban rebels. Obviously, no matter how passionately argued or convincing their evidence, all but one of such stories is necessarily untrue. What is certain is that the sinking of the *Maine* galvanised North American support for war with Spain² and that war then rapidly made the US an imperial power, while postponing genuine Cuban autonomy.

In 1925, one witness to the war, Tiburicio P. Castañeda, published *La Explosión del Maine* in Havana – a book dedicated to the Queen of Spain. His major *Maine* theses are that the explosion was an accident caused by an electrical short circuit on board the ship (Castañeda 1925: 42, 247) and that there was indeed a conspiracy – on the part of US officials, particularly Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Admiral Dewey, and especially Theodore Roosevelt, the then-assistant secretary of the Navy, to conceal the real cause of the disaster from the American public in order to proceed to war and the conquest of the Philippines.

In 1911, at considerable cost and with a massive engineering effort on the part of the US Army Corps of Engineers, a cofferdam was built around the wreck in Havana harbour (see Figure 2), the water pumped out, and the *Maine* was salvaged, with the stated purposes of resolving the mystery, recovering the dead and clearing Havana harbour of an obstacle to shipping.

On 16 March 1912, with great ceremony, the hulk was towed to sea and sunk in international waters, at a depth of 600 fathoms. Rather than putting an end to the circulating theories, however, this attempt to dispel doubt only



Figure 2 The cofferdam, Havana harbour, 1911

produced elaboration among latter-day conspiracy theorists.³ An argument quickly developed that the wreck had been raised precisely in order to re-sink the incriminating evidence (of an internal explosion) at a more inaccessible depth (e.g., Castañeda 1925: 196, 201).

In a work published in the US in 1976, Admiral Rickover of the US Navy revisited the case. Relying on photographs, diagrams and written documents produced by the 1898 Courts of Inquiry and the 1911 naval board of inspection, Rickover proposed that the boat was the victim of an accidental internal explosion. Overall, his analysis concurred with Castañeda's, but rather than finding a short circuit at fault, he blamed the spontaneous combustion of bituminous coal in a bunker adjacent to a powder magazine, and he thus explained rather than denied the raised position of the keel (e.g., Rickover 1976: note the technical, detailed, empirical style of presentation). While ostensibly *anti*-conspiracist in arguing against the mine thesis or any other conspiracy, Rickover's book too rested heavily upon interpretation of visual evidence, the superiority of modern knowledge, technical jargon and the engineering credentials of his investigators as well as the credibility of admiralty. This volume, and the centenary of the disaster (Pérez 1998), revived the issue: one centennial book mounted a prolonged attack on Rickover's motivations and the objectivity of his conclusions (Samuels and Samuels 1995); another, *El Enigma del Maine*, immediately challenged the scholarly shoddiness of Rickover's challengers (Remesal 1998), and thus, in conjunction with popularly circulating conspiracy theories, the academic debate continues indefinitely.

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As I have discovered in numerous conversations over the past 15 years, many Cubans today believe that the *Maine* was deliberately blown up in Havana's harbour by the Yankees themselves as a pretext for intervention, just as Cuban forces were on the point of victory over Spain. Indeed, this thesis is taught as historically verified fact to all students in a nationally standardised curriculum. The lack of dead fish in the harbour or a column of water is still cited in such occasional street-level narratives, and even the Rickover study may be referenced (rather indistinctly – e.g., '¡Even an *admiral* in the US Navy has admitted the explosion was internal, *chico!*') in this context. Many times, I have heard racialised variants of this conspiracy theory⁴ circulating popularly in Havana which hold that the white officers of the *Maine* were not coincidentally ashore while the black crewmen were all left aboard as sacrifices to Yankee imperialism.⁵

As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, such narratives have percolated in Cuba for over a century, and certainly pre-date the Cuban Revolution of 1959. At the same time, the specific *content* of the conspiracy theories has shifted over



Figure 3 USS *Maine* baseball team (Library of Congress)

time and in relation to contemporary conditions and according to the personal loyalties of each narrator. The general trend in Havana over the past century has clearly been from conspiracies blaming Spanish loyalists, through ones involving accident and a limited US cover-up, and toward deeply held convictions of full-scale, ruthless, bloody, racist Yankee conspiracy. Despite changes in content, however, the conspiracy theory *form* has held remarkably steady since the wreck of the ship. In other words, the context of conspiracy cannot simply be the ‘the Cold War’ or the Cuban Revolution as such but is at minimum a more general clash of great powers indifferent to the realities of the local (in this case Cuban) constituency.

Let me reiterate once again that although it may be integral to the conspiratorial genre for the analysis to seem almost drowned in a sea of precise but disconnected data, I am looking toward the *form* rather than *content* of the conspiracy. Although of course I would love to know the key facts, I do not know and am not in this essay looking for the truth value of the tale. What, then, can we derive from this case? The argument is certainly internally consistent, and logically possible, unprovable, and binarily reducible – either the *Maine* was blown up by

conspiracists, or it was not. The narratives involve malevolent, powerful human agents and fit into a much longer run of well-documented conspiracy and aggression. Note again the mode of presentation: scientific, precise, factual, militarised, detailed, and authoritative.

Conclusion: From the conspiracy to the Conspiracy

In *Miami*, Joan Didion made an extensive attempt to characterise the Cuban-American enclave of that city in the 1980s, with its underwater narrative, its soundtrack of intrigue and adversarial, personalised, extra-legal activity. With Alpha 66, Brothers to the Rescue, Oliver North, the CIA, the contras, and assassinations on and off Embassy Row, Cuban Miami seems to alternately replicate or invert the conspiracies of theorists in Havana. In this work, the Cold War indeed seems a tale of two cities, of Havana and, across the strait, Little Havana. It is not difficult to see why a scholar such as George Marcus (1999) would argue that conspiracy theories are Cold War phenomena. However, once again I would emphasise the importance of historical work as an essential caution to that tale. *Of course* the Cold War is the context there, but the Cold War was never the lone site of imperial political conflict over local, disenfranchised peoples. Thus, in the Cuban case, an elaborated conspiratorial genre emerged during earlier struggles between Spain and Britain, and later between Spain and the US – with their own conspiracies such as *La Escalera* and the mystery of the USS *Maine*, as well as more recent conspiracies versus the revolutionary Cuban government (see Humphreys 2012). Clearly, this highly adaptable form has flourished through the Cold War and beyond. Whether only a theory or, occasionally, proven beyond doubt, there is indeed a long run to conspiracy: Cuban conspiracy narratives are often populated by extra-territorial or foreign plotters, by an indeterminate number of covert factions in action, and always by powerfully supported, hyper-agentive agents or actors without scruple and of some malicious intent. I propose, then, that conspiracy theories, as circulated by an intimately affected and critical community of local theorists and spectators, *characteristically attempt to explain and come to terms with the hidden workings of empires and the events on which they seem to turn*. In effect, conspiracy theory is a discursive genre which acts as a particular moral critique of imperial power.

I still do not know whether the British consul plotted a slave uprising, what sank the *Maine*, whether revolutionary Cuba has been the victim of biological warfare from the US as alleged in a case recently taken to court in Geneva, or whether – as occasionally proposed in *Granma* editorials – the Cuban-American ‘mafia’, in revenge for the repatriation of Elián González, ‘stole ballot boxes, mixed up votes, surrounded polling places [and] resorted to changing the order

of the candidates on the ballot in order to trick the voters' of the US election of 2000 (Martínez 2000; also see Sahlins 2003). Perhaps, in a sense, the immediate truth value of these tales of intrigue is irrelevant to the greater truth to which they point, to the conspiracy of a disenfranchising colonialism. Rather than marking the pathology or poorly focused vision of the dispossessed, it is at this higher level that Cuban conspiracy theories rightly move the peripheral to centre stage, and constitute powerful, sweeping critiques of the illegitimate underpinnings of imperial power over the centuries.

Notes

1. Long before Oliver Stone's *JFK*, there was Lee Harvey Oswald and the 'Fair Play for Cuba Committee'. Indeed, theories of conspiracy in the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy seem to cross-cut many communities and much scholarship, in Miami and Havana (where one can find a wide selection of state-published and translated volumes such as *ZR Rifle: The Plot to Kill Kennedy and Castro* (Furiati 1994) and shorter texts (Allard 2012)), as well as in the rest of the US. However, as I will demonstrate, neither the Kennedy killing nor the Cold War itself is an adequate structure for understanding the conspiratorial mode.
2. 'In his first dispatch [Captain] Sigsbee had urged that public opinion be suspended, but this was not possible. To most Americans there was no doubt about the conclusion to be drawn from the fact that the *Maine* had been destroyed at night in a Spanish port. As retired Rear Admiral George E. Belknap said, it was significant that the ship should have been blown up "in that particular harbor at that particular time"' (Weems 1958).
3. For an excellent study in how conspiratorial explanation can become 'self-sealing', see Watzlawick (1977). Watzlawick describes an ingenious experiment carried out by Alex Bavelas in which two subjects without any medical training are separately shown medical slides and asked to distinguish between sick and healthy cells. Subject A gets accurate feedback about his or her responses from experimenters and in time guesses with a fair degree of accuracy. Subject B, however, gets 'noncontingent' reinforcement – his or her feedback is actually based on A's answers. B is searching for an order that does not exist in relation to his or her own theorizations. A and B are eventually asked to discuss what they have come to consider the rules for distinguishing between healthy and sick cells. A's explanations are simple and concrete; B's are of necessity very subtle and complex – after all, B had to form his or her hypothesis on the basis of very tenuous and contradictory hunches. The amazing thing, Watzlawick notes, is that A does not simply shrug off B's explanations as unnecessarily complicated or even absurd, but is impressed by their sophisticated 'brilliance'. A tends to feel inferior and vulnerable because of the pedestrian simplicity of his or her own assumptions, and the more complicated B's 'delusions', the more likely they are to convince A. Indeed, Watzlawick continues, their very baroque-ness may itself be self-fulfilling, as further evidence to the contrary tends to produce even more elaboration rather than correction (Watzlawick 1977).
4. Again, note that 'conspiracy theory' is my term: in Cuba such narratives would be called *teorías de conspiración* only in a very academic setting. In everyday use, they

would be roughly grouped as a subset of *intriga*. In popular contexts analogous to those in the US in which ‘conspiracy theory’ is dismissive, in Havana one would hear phrases – whose very number and variety speaks to the prevalence of the form in popular discourse – such as the following: ‘¡Oye, como te gusta la intriga!’; ‘¡Chicola, pero mira que tú inventas!’; ‘¡Qué cuento es ese [fulanola]!’; ‘¡Ay niñola pero déjate de cuentos!’; ‘¡Óyeme estela niñola, pero qué imaginación tú tienes!’; ‘¡Oye como te gusta el enredo!’; ‘¡Déjate de intriga, anda!’; ‘Oye, pa’ mi que tú eres chivato, chico, porque tú siempre tienes una explicación pa’ todo’; ‘¡Ay hijola, no compliques más las cosas!’; ‘¡Oye, tú eres la intriga misma!’; or ‘¡Coñó mi hijitola, qué teje’madeje!’ (Iván Pérez, personal communication, 10 March 2015).

5. This particular thesis is easily tested by photographic evidence (e.g., see Figure 3). The great majority of the enlisted crew of the *Maine* was the same colour as her officer corps. It is true that a disproportionate share of the officers, quartered aft, survived the mysteriously triggered explosion of the ship’s forward magazines, and it is also true that at least two African-American crewmen were killed (Remesal 1998).

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