

**Review of David Ray Griffin's *Cognitive Infiltration:*  
*An Obama Appointee's Plan to Undermine the 9/11 Conspiracy Theory.*  
Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2011. Pp. 196.  
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After a distinguished career as a process philosopher, David Ray Griffin has now, rather courageously, published a number of books on or related to so-called “conspiracy theories” regarding the catastrophe of September 11, 2001. *Cognitive Infiltration* is his latest. I am familiar with Griffin’s other works on this subject. And I have also studied many of the issues myself: fact checking, scrutinizing official reports as well as video and photographic evidence, reading the peer-reviewed literature, and even doing some conservation of momentum calculations regarding the plausibility of the collapse time of the North Tower. In general, I tend to agree with Griffin’s conclusions, and admire the skill and clarity with which he marshals his arguments. This book is every bit as rigorous and compelling as his others, but with the addition of humor.

In *Cognitive Infiltration* Griffin takes on two Harvard law professors, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule. In an article published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule propose that the government and its allies infiltrate groups that promote conspiracy theories deemed (somehow) to be “demonstrably false.” They take conspiracy theories about September 11 as their “running example.” Sunstein now heads up the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, and has been described by Elena Kagan as “the pre-eminent legal scholar of our time.”<sup>2</sup> And so, following Griffin, I will treat the article as though it were simply Sunstein’s.

Before continuing, I should acknowledge that I am not a dispassionate observer, but a participant in the debate on this issue. That is, I wrote what may have been the first substantial academic rebuttal to Sunstein’s article.<sup>3</sup> A draft of my rebuttal prompted a blog by Marc Estrin, which in turn sparked the Internet buzz that appears to have first alerted Griffin to the issue. (I have since written a second critique.<sup>4</sup>) So, I read Griffin’s book having already carefully scrutinized the article to which his book is a response, as well as a longer draft of Sunstein’s article that was published on-line.<sup>5</sup>

Griffin’s strategy is surprising. He argues, or rather *pretends* to argue, that Sunstein’s article may have two levels of meaning: a surface level that will not offend the powerful, and an esoteric level for the truly astute reader, namely, “one who reads footnotes” and the sources cited therein.

Even though this is really a joke intended to dramatize just how deeply and pervasively flawed Sunstein's arguments are, it is nonetheless surprisingly convincing. At every turn, Griffin exposes the clear falsity of Sunstein's claims (or sometimes faulty logic), often citing Sunstein's own tacit, and sometimes explicit, admission of said falsity, or else pointing to a source cited by Sunstein himself from which the falsity of his claims can be surmised. The idea is that Sunstein's arguments are so bad—they are based on premises so obviously false (especially when one reads the articles cited in his own footnotes)—that it actually begins to sound plausible to argue that Sunstein was intentionally signaling to astute readers that he could not possibly be serious. He could not be serious, that is, about his literal claims, and thus he must really intend to convey some other meaning—perhaps the near opposite of what he seems, on the surface, to be saying. It is a testament to both Griffin's skill as well as the ubiquity of Sunstein's fallacies that a book-length critique of this kind could be pulled off so successfully.

Griffin characterizes Sunstein's article as being composed of ten theses. The first and third thesis, respectively, involve the definition of conspiracy theories, and the characterization of conspiracy theories regarding September 11. The other theses can be summarized as follows: (2) "anti-government conspiracy theories in the United States are usually both unjustified and false"; (4) "the main cause of belief in the 9/11 conspiracy...is 'informational isolation'"; (5) the 9/11 conspiracy theory, in particular, is false and unjustified; (6) 9/11 conspiracy theorists are dangerous; (7) the government should attempt to undermine false and harmful conspiracy theories; (8) the government's approach should be dual-pronged, one approach for the general public, another for conspiracy purveyors; (9) hard-core purveyors are "resistant to correction"; and (10) the government should infiltrate groups that disseminate conspiracy theories.

Griffin addresses each thesis in turn, chapter by chapter. Within each chapter, Griffin first critiques the exoteric, straightforward surface interpretation of Sunstein's article. Then he argues that a plausible and coherent esoteric meaning may be present, which he carefully teases out. In so doing, Griffin not only exhaustively demonstrates the intellectual bankruptcy of Sunstein's proposal and arguments, but also capably defends the "9/11 Truth Movement," which seems to have been the main target of Sunstein's proposed infiltrations. The following is a short example of how the critique of one naturally leads to the defense of the other.

Sunstein claims that so-called "conspiracy theorists" are uninformed, or misinformed. However, as it applies to prominent members of the 9/11 Truth Movement, this claim is inaccurate, or at least inadequately supported. Regarding the collapse of the World Trade Center Building 7, for example, such "conspiracy theorists," including former BYU physicist Steven E. Jones, high school physics teacher David Chandler, architect Richard Gage, and at least hundreds of other scientists, scholars, and professionals, will tend to know a lot of specific and relevant information. For

instance, many will be able to cite the fact that the National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST), in the final version of its final report on the collapse of Building 7 (November 2008), admitted that for 2.25 seconds, during which time the building fell over 100 feet, it collapsed at an acceleration rate indistinguishable from freefall.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it was David Chandler who first demonstrated this publicly, forcing NIST finally to admit it.<sup>7</sup> Most people, in contrast, are not even aware that a third skyscraper collapsed on September 11! And even generally well-informed people will not be aware of these kinds of (highly significant) details. Perhaps there are other relevant facts of which these “conspiracy theorists” are unaware, but Sunstein neither says what these are nor indicates where they are to be found.

The relevance of Griffin’s critique, of course, goes far beyond the mere fact that a particular article co-authored by an influential legal scholar happens to be flawed in every major respect. For one thing, although Griffin does not press this issue, his book reveals that there must be biases in the systems that produced such an article. If so, can it be wise to sanction even less reliable entities, namely “government agents or their allies,” to decide which historical accounts are to be allowed, and which are to be undermined by covert operations?

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17.2 (2009): 202-227.

<sup>2</sup> Griffin vii.

<sup>3</sup> Kurtis Hagen, “Is Infiltration of ‘Extremist Groups’ Justified?” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24.2 (Fall 2010): 153-168.

<sup>4</sup> “Spinning a Response to Crippled Epistemologies” was presented at the Concerned Philosophers for Peace conference, Montreal, October 30, 2010. A longer version, “Conspiracy Theories and Stylized Facts,” is currently under review.

<sup>5</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories,” *Social Science Research Network* (2008). Available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1084585>.

<sup>6</sup> NIST, “Final Report on the Collapse of World Trade Center Building 7” (November 2008, final version), 45. Available at: <http://wtc.nist.gov/NCSTAR1/PDF/NCSTAR%201A.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See Griffin 129.