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Spreading delusions: *Loose Change*, viral video and democratic discourse

According to *Loose Change*, a popular Internet video, President Bush and others within the government are responsible for a cover-up of what really happened on 9/11. While the film doesn't provide a definitive explanatory theory, it implies that the Bush administration may have: A. planned 9/11 (with or without al Qaeda's actual involvement) B. Allowed it to happen on purpose or C. was incompetent. While the last option seems most believable, the film is rhetorically constructed so that those who watch it and are already suspicious of the government are susceptible to believing that Bush caused 9/11. While it may seem like a dissenting viewpoint to believe that the government caused 9/11, at the heart of it is a belief that the government must be responsible because otherwise it would mean that the government is fallible. Believers in the 9/11 Truth narrative so internalize hegemonic discourses of American superiority that they believe if the government doesn't have our best interests at heart, it must be out to get us. In other words, the discourse of 9/11 Truth reifies hegemony, despite its democratic origins. This type of conspiracy discourse leads one to wonder what does one do with the "knowledge" that the government may be that nefarious?

The answer for many is joining the 9/11 Truth Movement, a group of independent activists distributed around the world with the singular goal of demanding that the government reopen the investigation into 9/11. Despite various mainstream media critiques of *Loose Change* and the 9/11 Truth Movement as "paranoid conspiracy

theorists,” members of the movement see themselves as citizens exercising their obligation to hold the government accountable for what they see as a cover-up of 9/11.

I believe that 9/11 Truth is an attempt to negotiate a stable identity within the discourses of postmodernity by substituting a paranoid narrative for American hegemony, but this is not the point I’d like to make here. Instead, I’d like to interrogate the possibility for democratic action implied by the spread of possibly delusional beliefs through viral videos. I believe that the assumption that viral videos improve our democratic processes by allowing everyone to make their voice heard is dependent on a naïve view of agency that holds on to the illusion of the Enlightenment subject.

I think what *Loose Change* shows is that the promise of viral videos is dependent on the discourses that define our democracy. As a new medium, viral videos may put the means of production of discourse in more hands than prior media, but these discourses still take place within a larger hegemonic order. Rather than buy into the assumption that “the truth will set us free” and more participation means more freedom, I propose interrogating the discourses spread through viral videos in order to unpack the hegemonic assumptions at play within these videos as cultural artifacts.

More specifically, I believe that viral videos are basically just another medium through which ideology may be spread, not some kind of miracle cure for hegemony. As such I think we must critically interrogate these videos to find the hegemonic assemblages at play within the work. Because what viral videos amount to is a more rapidly proliferating medium through which delusion may be spread. And this is why I’m Deleuzian. I apply a rhizomatic approach that combines dialectical materialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian historicity in order to get at the assemblages of class,

race, gender, sexuality, etc. at work within these types of videos to unlock the flows of desiring-production that contribute to the social-production of the contemporary semiotic regime.

As the example of *Loose Change* shows, viral videos are a new medium through which delusional beliefs can spread, reinforcing hegemony and subverting democratic processes. Or they can be a means by which counterhegemonic discourses form assemblages that begin to destabilize the existing order by disrupting the deterritorialization and reterritorialization at work within the late capitalist order. Assuming that just because more people get to say things it makes it more democratic depends on adherence to an 18th century view of rationality that ignores the discourse between subjectivity and structural constraints in the contingent formation of identity. So instead of just celebrating the means by which subjects speak, we must still pay attention to the discourses that speak the subject.