

'JFK' exposes faction of ruling class, not class

By CHARLES BOWE

Conspiracy theories are receiving more attention than usual this year. Since the release of Oliver Stone's movie "JFK," awareness about the abuses of a national security state has become noticeable. Pollsters claim that large numbers of people think the Warren Commission was a fraud.

But even the most shocking stories about our government never inspire revolutionary responses. The public seems to think conspiracy theories miss the point about "the system" today. The public, as often happens, is correct.

"JFK" is a movie about a New Orleans district attorney who uncovers, but cannot prove, that U.S. intelligence officials murdered President Kennedy in Vietnam and elsewhere. Many of us are sympathetic to the film because since 1963 we have witnessed Watergate, terrifying revelations about CIA actions abroad, and even a theory (best argued by Gary Sick's book, "October

Surprise") that the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign buried Jimmy Carter's reelection chances by sabotaging his efforts to release American hostages from Iran.

What next? If the crucial political events of the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s were all covert operations, what can we do? Conspiracy theorists lead us to think that we should investigate and expose the shady world of spies and arms dealers, and that thereby we can break up the "cabal" of secret officials.

But conspiracy theories often rest on the mistaken perception that governments run the world. They do not distinguish, as Marxism does, between substructure and superstructure.

The substructure is the "mode of production", who owns capital, who has to sell their labor, and the predictable relationship between the two. Although the U.S. government owns considerable amounts of capital, the privately-owned corporate sector, and multinational corporations in particular, dwarf the government. The never-to-be-paid federal debt means our

government is essentially owned by international creditors.

The superstructure, the icing on the capitalist cake, is the place of culture, laws, religion and politics. There are some resources at stake in the superstructure, but superstructural changes always occur within the parameters of the substructure.

As President Bush's pathetic "mission" to Asia demonstrates, even the most powerful *governmental* leader in the world cannot compete with capital. Conspiracy buffs who believe Bush's CIA killed Kennedy, set up Nixon, then fixed the 1980 election probably wonder why Bush can't "fix" Toyota. Conspiracy theorists want us to keep our heads in the superstructure while the mode of production passes unnoticed.

Another misleading capitalist value promoted by conspiracy theories is individualism. It is no accident that capitalist education and politics exaggerate the role of "great men" in history. The cult of the personality—whether JFK or the pope, Gorbachev

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rule itself

or Reagan—robs us of an important intellectual tool: the ability to think conceptually, in abstract terms.

And precisely this point causes the commotion surrounding "JFK." Most conspiracy theories promise the "real story" about historical events, engross us with names and details, and never address concepts such as imperialism, fascism, militarism or capitalism itself. But because "JFK" dissents and hints that the military-industrial complex killed the president, almost every "respectable" columnist in America has slammed the movie. If Stone had made a film that blamed the mafia or Fidel Castro, not one of those "free-thinking" editorial writers would blink an eye.

The crucial scene in "JFK," the very heart of the film, features district attorney Jim Garrison receiving anonymous information from a Pentagon official. Does he advise Garrison to find the ringleader of the plot? No, he directs him to figure out why:

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"That's the real question—why? The how and the who is just scenery for the public . . . Does it really matter who shot from what rooftop?"

Through the informant and through Garrison himself, Stone condemns the military-industrial complex, names specific defense contractors, whispers the word "fascism" and calls the president a "broker for the arms business." What an exceptional moment for Hollywood!

But that is as far Stone, or Hollywood, will go. What's infuriating about "JFK" is what it does not say. It intrigues us with interfactional disputes inside the ruling class but fails to expose the ruling class as a whole.

Having identified the proper enemy—the war machine that needs to pad its profit margin—what solutions does "JFK" leave us to ponder? Revive the spirit of Kennedy, "the fallen king!" The best we can do, "JFK" suggests, is find an imperialist we can live with. Applaud our favorite rich white male.

Choose a faction of capital whose superstructural appearance looks nice.

"JFK" puts a finger on a conspiracy much larger than murder, then dares not speak its name: class struggle. Despite its giant flaw, however, and despite its outrageously sexist subplot about Garrison's family life, "JFK" is a thought-provoking movie and better than most works of conspiracy theory.

We should not completely overlook the important contributions of conspiracy theorists: Woodward and Bernstein, CIA whistle-blowers such as Philip Agee and John Stockwell, Gary Sick, and even Oliver Stone. They are taking risks to perform an important task, to shatter the myth of the "land of the free."

But we should not see their works as blueprints for correcting the abuses they are documenting. Even such a promising film as "JFK" succumbs to the same capitalist assumptions and calls for the same capitalist solutions. □