

## Interview with Sandra Baringer JUNE, 2013

**1. As background for the general reader, what have other scholars before you said about “narratives of suspicion”? In what new direction do you want to point us?**

This question is covered in the introductory chapter of the book. Ricouer talks about the “hermeneutics” of suspicion, and Hofstadter the “paranoid style” in American politics, though his book predates the late twentieth century that is time frame covered in my book. Most people hearing the term “narratives of suspicion” would think it refers to detective fiction and crime novels and nonfiction.



**The logo of the FBI, a government agency often referenced in narratives of suspicion.**

My first husband, when he was a journalist, covered a trial of a well-known member of the American Indian Movement accused of murdering a grave robber in Lincoln County, Oregon. The prospective publisher for the book that he was writing about the case lost all interest when the defendant was acquitted. This illustrates either the hunger of the American reading public for having their suspicions and fears validated, or the expectation of the publishing industry that this is the dynamic that drives the market. Probably both factors are in play. Why is this?

**2. Citizens have always held suspicions about their leaders. You cite Watergate as one event that helped spawn a new wave of conspiracy theories. What other real-world events or trends have affected the “metanarrative of suspicion”?**

Obviously 9/11, which had not yet happened when most of the book was conceived and written. Addressing the latter half of the twentieth century, we would start with the Red Scare of fifties McCarthy, and the Kennedy assassination redeployed the metanarrative away from the communists into other directions. Watergate was only one part of a complex of interrelated events in the Nixonian era: the failed prosecution of Daniel Ellsberg under the Espionage Act for releasing the Pentagon Papers to the press; the contents of the Pentagon

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Papers themselves with their revelations of a history of misrepresentation of events by the federal government to the American public and even to itself; the overreaching investigations of the New Left and other Vietnam War protestors brought to light by the Church committee Senate investigation; the Weather Underground bombings and the inability of the Department of Justice to obtain convictions against most of them, as in the case of Daniel Ellsberg, due to law enforcement incompetence in the form of warrantless searches, etc.

### **3. What is “agency panic”? How can students see this in films like *Blade Runner* or *Enemy of the State*?**

“Agency panic” is a concept developed by Timothy Melley in his excellent book, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000). I believe he is playing on the concept of “moral panic” explained by Birmingham School theorist Stuart Hall in his heretofore out-of-print seventies book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, just re-released in 2013 in a “special 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition” – indicating that the post-9/11 environment has gotten people thinking about these things again.

Long story short, people gin themselves up into “moral panics” about certain hot-button issues (see ‘libidinal economy’ below), enabling the constabulary (or in American iconography, the cavalry) to come to the rescue, resulting in a clamping down on civil liberties.

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Certainly there is a relationship between the two: teenagers and government are both scary.

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In “agency panic,” people come to realize that they have lost control, or “agency,” over their own lives – a predictable outcome of loss of civil liberties. But this is a gross oversimplification of complex cultural and psychological dynamics.

In *Blade Runner*, based on a novel by the most paranoid writer in American fiction, the truly psychotic Philip K. Dick (may he rest in peace), the very legitimacy of being a sentient being is called into question. *Enemy of the State* is part of a simpler genre of “enemy within” law enforcement gone bad, which we have been and will continue to be seeing more of.

### **4. What is a “libidinal economy”? How can the general reader spot this (and its effects) in fiction?**

*Libidinal Economy* is the title of a book by Jean Francois Lyotard – a key text which, like Stuart Hall’s *Policing the Crisis*, is informed by the political and cultural upheavals of the sixties and seventies. People interested in the concept should read Lyotard directly. It has to do with Freud’s model of the libido motivating people’s behaviors in ways far beyond actual sex, but gets beyond the Oedipal model that many theorists of the era often seemed to be stuck on.

Lyotard is specifically discussing events in 1968 in France, but students should know that activists in the New Left in 1967-68 – across the world, not just in the United States – really thought that they were starting a worldwide Marxist revolution. Two hundred-plus of them were shot dead in Mexico City, and many of those surviving are still trying to figure out how they could have so seriously misjudged revolutionary potential. Was it all just raging hormones?

### **5. Has the “master narrative” changed?**

The evolution of the “master narrative” of American exceptionalism as described

by Fredric Jameson – at least for thinking people, though probably not for the publishers of McGraw-Hill textbooks and other American history textbooks approved for use in American public high schools -- is best seen in a youtube video of the first few minutes of the first episode of the first season of HBO's *The Newsroom*, wherein fictional character Will McAvoy holds forth in a fact-filled diatribe on what's not best about America.

On the other hand, Fox News calls *The Newsroom* a "liberal fantasy," so what do I know?

**6. In which contemporary stories do you see -- in novels or on television or in films -- strong evidence of a new generation of narratives of suspicion?**

Naturally, all the CSI series. Like the internet generally, the forensically-focused police investigation series tend to instill the idea that science and technology are much more available and determinative of certainty than they actually are in real life. Since complex TV dramas that aren't about police investigations are so hard to come by, I think the evidence speaks for itself, but I don't personally find most cop shows all that entertaining. I watch TV dramas about lawyers, and doctors if they are actually addressing medical issues and not just dating drama. I do watch *Dexter*. Dexter himself represents a model of a "sociopath"

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**The Kennedy assassination redeployed the metanarrative away from the communists into other directions.**

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that is very controversial. But overriding that, probably, is the master narrative of vigilante justice. Criminals sometimes get loose because of legal loopholes or "technicalities," but that isn't always why *Dexter* has to intervene: sometimes his lesser random colleagues are incompetent, and sometimes the criminal is just a larger-than-life mega-villain, projecting the narrative into an evocation of a Greek or Hindu battle among immortals.

**7. Why do we seem to think all teenagers are secretly vampires, and that all governments are hiding aliens (or zombies)?**

As to the first, I'm not sure that we do. There is a difference between imagining or treating certain drives through metaphor, which is basically what blood-sucking is (a metaphor), and recognizing that institutions of government are not always to be trusted. Certainly there is a relationship between the two: teenagers and government are both scary.

**8. What three things would you like a general reader to take away from this work?**

1. Just because somebody is arrested doesn't necessarily mean they are guilty.
2. Just because somebody is convicted doesn't necessarily mean they are guilty.
3. Nevertheless, our democracy and judicial system can work if our citizens are constantly vigilant and not parsimonious about their contributions of both time and tax money to protecting the rights of us all.

My answers perhaps illustrate Wimsatt and Beardley's concept of the 'intentional fallacy.'

**9. Since you wrote this, the preconditions for suspicion have increased, with electronic surveillance and government (and private) data ever-growing. Have your own views developed since then? Has the field of study changed?**

Others have done much more with this field than I have, since I'm primarily engaged in teaching college freshmen in the broad field of academic writing and personal narrative, so we can't spend all our time talking about just this. I don't think it's so much my own views that have developed but rather the technological potentials of mass surveillance to engender vast new vistas of suspicion, suspicion of being surveilled, suspicion of suspicion of being surveilled, etc.

National security representatives are already complaining that Snowden's revelation that they're compiling data has ruined their entire plan because now the terrorists know they're being watched.

**10. You mention Paul Ricouer, Timothy Melley and Frederick (Fredric) Jamison. What other scholars in this area would you recommend for the general reader?**

Primarily, I'd recommend Melley's new book *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (2012). Mike Davis's work is also useful, especially *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1999).

For those interested in something more in the political science discipline, I'd recommend *Tyranny of the Minority: The Subconstituency Politics Theory of Representation* (2010). For examination of the relationship between narratives of suspicion and institutionalized state violence in the forms of "social liquidation, cultural extermination, physiological evisceration, and racist terror," see the works of Dylan Rodriguez and other scholars associated with Critical Resistance.



**Gene Hackman in the 1998 film "Enemy of the State," a story about government surveillance.**