

DEPOLITICIZING GOSSIP

As much as we may think that our gossip columns and tabloids are new, the peddling of rumour, gossip and exposure of the lives of the famous are as old as writing: Dante's *Inferno* or Rabelais' *Pantagruel and Gargantua* are early versions of providing dirt on the prominent living. Medieval Florence, Venice or Paris were rife with stories of lechery and sodomy, simony and perjury, hypocrisy and corruption. Savonarola was executed for his exposures and Martin Luther split the church with his. For decades in France and Britain, newspapers and gossip columnists have exposed the peccadillos of the rich and the venalities of the poor, inventing and magnifying those that came to hand. *Private Eye* in London and *Le Canard Enchaîné* in Paris have been for some time the places that British and French readers have gone to if they want to have their news flavoured with smut and salacious venom.

Obviously all of this is displayed and gloat over so that a better world might be imagined. Dante had no problem with his alternatives - intellectual beauty guided by Thomist Catholicism would purge the world of the false prophets; Rabelais probably thought that the peoples' common sense would prevail against the chicanery of the establishment; and Martin Luther, evoking the example of the dark pagan German gods and their transformation through the Blonde Gallilliean, wanted to free the people from the sale of front row seats in Paradise at the hands of an Italian Mafioso Pope. The latter-day British and French simply expect their elite to be romantically corrupt, though perhaps wanting them to be virtuous.

Late twentieth-century North American gossip/religion is of a different breed. The *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, and the *Globe* (formerly *Midnight*) are basically about the Power of Positive Thinking, derived from Dale Carnegie's popular idealism, aided and abetted by capitalism, God (whoever s/he is) and the heroes of the Media. The secret of the universe is revealed in the triumphs of the human will over the false gods of money, media and sex. To tempt fate is one of the great challenges, and fate appears in different guises - as the supernatural which interferes with the everyday, and as the structures which control the everyday. The universe is populated by ex's - ex-wives, ex-husbands - even extraterrestrials - who descend, fail to descend, depart, come back, go off again. Our heroes suffer "terrible ordeals", have "secret 40-year loves", experience "pain of the beautiful women" they once loved, and produce clones who are "Elvis' other daughter", who "wanted to escape father's shadow", or who are shunned by their TV fathers because they took part in a "Voodoo Movie."

The new gossip is of those Positive Thinkers who grasped at the infinite, but had trouble holding on. If they were crushed, it was not because of themselves. "Sex and Money ruined TV preacher Jim Bakker", says the *Star* (because he wasn't positive enough?), but "psychics bring us close to God", retorts the *Globe*. Meanwhile "Stardom is wrecking my life", the *Globe* makes Huey Lewis say. And Nancy Reagan, poor girl, will always feel insecure because of her heart-breaking childhood. The *National Enquirer* (for a long time the only tabloid of Rabelaisian pastiche), having given up on the two-headed monster who gives birth in a surrogate womb to the three-legged dwarf, has now concluded that its only serious characters are right-wing politicians, Lady Di, and the stars of the soaps. Positive Thinking is a struggle which must have its Saints, not even those who are potentially venal, but simply errant Knights and Ladies attempting to wrestle fate to the ground. Not quite King Arthur and the Knight of Camelot; more like Ryan O'Neill peddling Bibles in *Paper Moon*.

The people who read all this stuff are a mixed bag if the personal columns can be trusted. Among them are psychics, voodoo specialists, miracle ladies, voodoo prophets, action astrologers ("cabalistic numbers to play the lottery through ancient astrological rules"), faith healers, speakers in

'tongues'. The lonely in unlikely juxtapositions search for each other: Irish Methodist in Hawaii, Libra looking for Scorpio, child of God, spirit-filled Christian, divorced Southern Baptist, correctional institute inmate, Libra Catholic, ruggedly divorced black Jehovah's Witness (no vices). And anyone can become anything, instantly. For \$2 there is a success kit, for \$3 you can become an ordained minister, for \$10 a bishop, for \$20 a songwriter. Real estate seems to be going very cheap everywhere, and if the worst comes to the worst, you can get brand-new ID (including birth certificate) and start all over with Visa and Mastercard. But above all, remember that your prayers will be answered only if you know the Creator's real name: "Request our free booklet, 'Why aren't your prayers answered today?' Learn the Name of the All Mighty." Sounds like Jehovah's Witnesses? It is. But never mind, if you are really trapped in all of this, Fundamentalists Anonymous has just opened a chapter in Toronto to "support ex-members of fundamentalist religions and to oppose the 'religious right' in politics." Thus to get out of the circular world of cult positivism, you have to enrol in another cult (modelled after Alcoholics Anonymous, which is itself modelled on Pentecostal prayer meetings). And presumably their meetings will consist of confessions by those who were deluded, as if the Canadian Legion were suddenly to be taken over by Born-Again Pacifists, and everybody sits by the fire to tell gossipy tales about the bad old days.

But as the antics of the American Presidency have displayed for the past two decades, all of this is not confined to the evangelists and the paranoid electronic tabloids. The new Dale Carnegies are, on the one side, those energetic management specialists who produce tedious moneymaking



tomes on Excellence, other, the Jane Fonda work out to the Narcissism. Their yard is Betty Ford, decaying rich and gossip factory, the Purgatorial reach who would reach Nirvana. But - in noticed - Excellence being cured of d having or not h nothing to do w copy of *The New* gossip that really that most business lighted to have C while they identify 'Admiral' Poindrel *National Enquirer* its July 28 issue to action who's ma pompous, prying his honest, fort

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Conspiracy Theories and **AIDS**

**California (Econet)
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AIDS Virus :
Man-made in the
USA?**

Stefan Hyme, a controversial author in both Germanies, recently discovered a 50-page research report on the origins of the HTLV-III AIDS virus. The report was written by East German biologist Jakob Segal, former head of the Institute for General Biology at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, and was reported in English only in Harare, Zimbabwe.

In the 3-page interview in West Berlin's *Tageszeitung*, Hyme asked the scientist about the results of his genetic and epidemiological research. Segal said that he ended up tracing the virus to the military research institute at Fort Detrick in the United States. The theory that AIDS was originally a harmless monkey virus was "deliberate disinformation", he said. "The transformation [from monkey to human] is so immense that it lies beyond all probability."

Segal said that virological evidence was the most convincing. Genome analysis indicates that the AIDS virus is a so-called virological chimera that consists of segments of the Visna virus as well as the HTLV-III virus. As there is no natural biological process by which an exchange of genomes could have taken place, the AIDS virus was the result either of a miracle or of genetic engineering, he said.

The AIDS virus was first identified by Professor Luc Montagnier at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, in the spring of 1983. He termed it Lymphadenopathy Associated Virus (LAV) and sent it to pro-

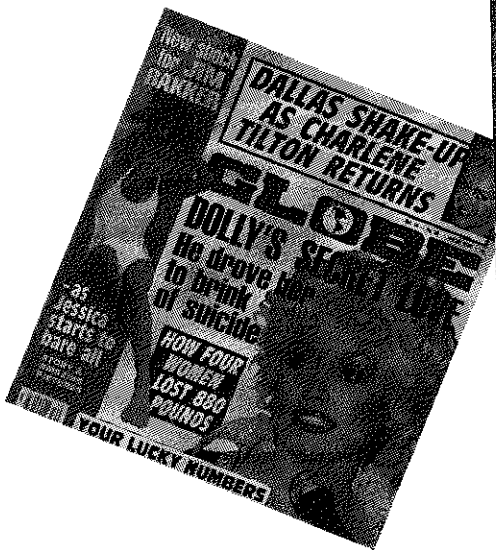
fessor Gallo in Bethesda, Maryland. Gallo compared the LAV virus with the HTLV I and II viruses he had discovered.

Three months later, Gallo described the LAV virus again and called it HTLV-III. Subsequently, the Montagnier group in Paris analyzed the genomes of HTLV viruses and discovered that the differences between HTLV-I and HTLV-3 (AIDS) were so great that a coincidental, natural transformation from one to the other was entirely improbable. Gallo had published his results too soon, they said. The AIDS virus could not unambiguously be assigned to the HTLV virus group.

As there was now no scientifically plausible explanation for the origins of the AIDS virus, scientists began to analyze various viruses that showed some resemblance to it. In the process they found the Visna virus, whose incubation period takes as long as that of the AIDS virus. The Visna virus is frequently seen in Iceland, where it engenders a brain illness in sheep.

Segal went on to describe how Gallo compared the genome of the Visna virus with that of the HTLV virus in a series of experiments. The result was that the Visna virus and HTLV-I genomes are identical in two places. This meant that they are only distantly related. However, the comparison between the Visna virus and the HTLV-III (AIDS) virus showed there were 23 identical places.

Segal's conclusion was that the genetically engineered Visna virus originates from a P-4 high security laboratory, where scientists are allowed to manipulate pathogenic agents like viruses. The first P-4 laboratory in the world was opened in the fall of 1977 at Fort Detrick, Maryland. As



comes on Excellence, and on the other, the Jane Fondas whose acolytes work out to the tunes of the Culture of Narcissism. Their potential graveyard is Betty Ford's home for the decaying rich and famous, the great gossip factory, the ultimate Purgatorial resting-place for those who would reach the positivistic Nirvana. But - in case we had not noticed - Excellence and Narcissism, being cured of drug addictions, and having or not having a mistress, have nothing to do with ethics. A recent copy of *The New York Times* ("all the gossip that really matters") reports that most businessmen would be delighted to have Ollie North on board, while they identify personally with 'Admiral' Poindexter. And the *National Enquirer* devotes six pages of its July 28 issue to North, "a man of action who's made mincemeat of pompous, prying politicians with his honest, forthright answers."

Now there's an interesting problem. The new hero is a product of training in espionage, that modern phenomenon which is essentially concerned with spies taking hidden commands from hidden bosses. The spy lives his whole life predicated on the knowledge that everything he does is of such stuff as gossip is made. His heroism therefore consists of how well he can tell us convincing lies in order to heroically resist the charge that his activities can be gossiped about.

So if the power of positive thinking leads to an Ollie North as Hero of the Boardrooms, the gossip industry has reached its nadir. All gossip is basically political. It is only fun if it allows us to peek into the process of power, to show that the Emperor has no clothes. Contragate is instead the ultimate in the depoliticization of gossip. The tabloids and the evangelicals, even the Ford clinic and the Gary Harts, may continue to be the sources of scandal and rumour, but the real politics is above all that. Where Mendacity is King - especially with a Marine face - what is the point of gossip? Rabelais would have let out a great belly-laugh over that one.

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