

Conspiracism: Archaeology and morphology of a political myth

Julien Giry

Université de Rennes I, France

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Abstract

Through an empirical approach of several conspiracy theories (Knight Templars, Jesuits, Illuminati, Free-masons or Jewish conspiracy), I have noticed they develop six main characteristics. First, the conspiratorial myth points out scapegoats in a non-aleatory way. They usually belong to ethnical or religious minorities. Secondly, those scapegoats try to acquire an overwhelming power in all fields. Thirdly, to achieve this goal, they corrupt the whole society, especially on mores and sexuality. Fourthly, to set up their domination the scapegoats use the art of simulation and dissimulation. They yield a cult of secrecy. Fifthly, the scapegoats are consistently portrayed through symbolic morphological types, frequently as animals. Finally, conspiratorial myths undergo a process of hybridization and creolization. They go through transformations, alterations and medleys. Every conspiracy theories mix up into one another.

Keywords

Conspiracy theory, political myth, antisemitism, antimassonism, functionalism

To label conspiracism a political myth requires first that we recall that a myth should be understood as ‘a legendary tale [...] which also fulfils an explanatory function, providing a certain number of keys for understanding the present, constituting a grid upon which the disconcerting chaos of facts and events may seem to be reduced to a certain order [and whose] explanation is even more convincing in that it claims to be total and of exemplary clarity [wherein] all the facts, from wherever they arise, are brought back, by a seemingly inflexible logic, to a single and unique causality which is both elementary and all-powerful’ (Girardet, 1986: 13–14, 54). From this definition, it follows that a political myth is a hegemonic and explicatory meta-narrative so much as, from a political science point of view, its cognitive and symbolic aspect which impinges upon how things are represented and function. Thus, it appears to us that conspiracism presents as a myth in its claim to expose or uncover a political and historicized representation of the world whose comprehension is dependent on its mastery. The course of history, that is apparently chaotic jumble of facts

Corresponding author:

Julien Giry, Université de Rennes I, Faculté de droit et de science politique, 9 Rue Jean Macé CS 54203, 35042 Rennes, France

Email: juliengiry.sciencepo@gmail.com

and events, then becomes limpidly clear when it is re-read and re-interpreted through the conspiracist prism which, by definition, irremediably excludes any idea of contingency. Everything is linked, things are not what they may seem and, above all, nothing happens by chance; all has been minutely planned in advance (Campion-Vincent, 2007: 11). Such is the fundamental axiom of the conspiracist myth as illustrated by Barruel (2010: 11):

In the French Revolution – he wrote – everything, even down to the most frightful excesses, was foreseen, intended, contrived, determined, decided upon: everything was the effect of the most profound wickedness, since all had been prepared and brought about by men who alone held the threads of long-fomented conspiracies in the secret societies and who knew how to choose and hasten the moments most favourable for their plots.

With Senator Joseph McCarthy (1951: 169–170), the rhetoric was identical. He denounced the alleged Communist infiltration of the United States as being the result of a plan conceived ‘stage by stage, with conscious intent [...] a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man’. However, in order to operate, a myth must necessarily fulfil certain functions, ones which can be identified, though admittedly in various different proportions, in the Jesuit, Masonic, Jewish or even reptilian plot myths as well as in their diverse subsequent hybridizations.

The non-random designation of scapegoats

In order to function, in the first instance, these myths need to designate scapegoats. Such scapegoats exist only through the intent of others: leading conspiracists like Lyndon LaRouche, Alex Jones or Alain Soral, that is to say, political purveyors of the idea of the global plot, those collectively involved in promoting conspiracy theories like the 9/11 Truth Movement or the Réseau Voltaire, or even just simple ‘citizen sleuths’ (Olmsted, 2011). The scapegoats identified are at once victims and perpetrators. They are held to be perpetrators to the extent that they are accused of being at the heart of all the ills, crises or catastrophes affecting the society. They are victims since they become the object of persecutions which seek to punish their faults that they cannot expiate, except through their total elimination. From this perspective, those actively pursuing a conspiracist logic are persuaded of the justice of their cause; the persecution that they will inflict upon their identified scapegoats could only be proper justice with respect to the violence supposedly initiated by these later upon the society. Thus, it is not a question of further aggression, but one of legitimate and necessary counter-violence against an implacable enemy, one which is capable of any degree of treachery and infamy. By asserting this idea of a kind of mechanism of legitimate defence, conspiracists construct a practical method for reversing the paradigm of hate and of original culpability.

The determination of who constitute the scapegoats does not arise out of a purely blind choice. It derives from a process of non-random victim selection. From initial observation, it appears that the scapegoats always belong to a minority or marginal group with respect to a given society or culture, but one which is considered ‘sufficiently powerful to impose upon general opinion an interpretation of events which [...] would be simply an official version of them’ (Viltard, 2003: 89) and which would thereby conceal the underlying conspiracy. As Girard (1982: 28–29) observed: ‘Ethnic or religious minorities tend to polarize against majorities. Each society has its own criterion of victim selection, certainly, but such selection is transcultural in its principle’. The scapegoat groups are suspected *a priori* of intending to subvert the established political, social, economic and moral order in order to replace it with a competing system of values to which they

have sworn allegiance and faith. In this respect, conspiracy theories ‘are also after their own fashion theories of power’ (Viltard, 2003: 92). Even more, Girard (1982: 50) adds, the scapegoat is ‘an individual originating from elsewhere, he is a typical foreigner’. The scapegoats are thus both *outsiders* (Becker, 1985: 25) and *aliens* (Giry, 2014: 175). They are *outsiders* to the extent that the scapegoats are designated as falling outside of a determined social group – a nation, for example – and of its values and norms. In its turn, the idea of the *alien*, popularized by Ridley Scott’s 1979 film of that name, carries necessarily a negative moral dimension, a deeply distrustful prejudice which projects itself as the expression of nativist feeling. The *alien* in the English-language sense is a creature intent on subverting the society and its established values; it incarnates the spectre of the destabilization of the cultural, economic, moral, social and political order. One may note that the expression *illegal alien* serves to designate an illegal, undocumented immigrant in the current official terminology of the United States. In a word, the scapegoat represents the exclusive source of all the ills by which the society is afflicted. As Girardet (1986: 43) pointed out, the scapegoat group ‘comes to represent the party of *those-different-from-us* [...] a formula which in the occurrence must be understood as charged with all the singularly heavy weight of a society’s ancestral fears. Jesuits, Jews and Freemasons are not only projected as the executive agents of certain rival states. The threat which they represent is that [...] of the marauder lurking around houses, [...] of the nameless vagabond carrying the infections of disease and epidemics, whose arrival spreads blight in the crops and brings death to cattle’.

The quest for absolute power

The second aspect characterizing conspiracist myths is the insatiable appetite for political, moral and economic power which they attribute to the scapegoat group. In this context, the Jews and the Freemasons provoke both a fear and a fascination through their alleged desire to seize power on a global scale. Considered this way, the Knights Templar and the Jesuit Society appear as the first organized groups to be accused of fomenting a mega-conspiracy with planet-wide reach. The universal mission of the Jesuits consequently became the object of widespread suspicion; accused of harbouring anti-national attitudes, their oath of allegiance to the Pope *intuitu personae* nourished the fantasy that these agents of a foreign will would engage in all manner of subversions. ‘As a cosmopolitan order, functioning beyond the guiding ethos of the nations and more precisely that of France, which brought to the world the message of liberty during the great Revolution, the Company of Jesus was a forerunner *Internationale* embarked upon the conquest of the world’ (Leroy, 1992: 121). Undeniably, we are here dealing, as later with the Jewish conspiracy myth, with a populist rhetoric, which in contrast exalted the notion of a homogeneous national identity (Hermet, 2001: 15) which was particular to one people, to an *ethnos* confronted with agents from without, a cosmopolitan power-hungry minority without any attachments and loyalty other than to itself. To label this phenomenon, Philippe Aldrin (2005: 244–247) uses the expression ‘Winston Parva effect’ in reference to studies undertaken by Elias and Scotson (1994: 35) in a suburban district of Leicester.¹ These authors observed how the exchange of gossip, as a communicational device, allowed those who were long-established residents of the zone to reaffirm their own values in the manner of an in-group and to stigmatize as deviant the exogenous behaviour of the recent arrivals to the area, who thus formed an out-group. In this sense, the conspiracist political myth allows the activation of a process of drawing together and mobilizing a national community when faced with an enemy, as, for example, those labelled anti-France or un-American, as having come from abroad or acting in the interests of an outside power as in the case of the perceived Communist threat to the United States (Giry, 2014: 241–276), by contrasting the cosmopolitan malign intent of such infiltrators with the virtuous values and cohesive identity of a determined

group (Casanova, 2014: 38). To bring to fruition their grand malevolent conspiracies, the Jesuits, the Illuminati and the Freemasons have been accused of resorting to murder and to devoting a thoroughgoing passion, even a cult, to money (Leroy, 2000: 173), which supposedly has led them to shamelessly engage in theft or in the despoliation of inheritances for which they relentlessly target, in particular, the most vulnerable: the widow and the orphan. Similarly, in David Icke's (2002: 78) book, the allegedly reptilian Illuminati are accused of eating human flesh, the sign of a limitlessly perverse deviance. In brief, the purported conspirators are a totally immoral group of individuals who are seeking to corrupt the souls and minds of their contemporaries.

Corruption of the society

The corruption which scapegoats are held to exert upon society is the third typical characteristic that may be noted in recurrent conspiracist themes. Effectively, the corruption claimed to be exercised by the Jews, the Freemasons and the Illuminati is said to be such that any moral intent is foreign to them. The Jesuits are accused of engaging in the unbridled licentiousness of homosexual and paedophilic orgies, sheltered by the high walls of their austere monastic institutions. In this context, Robison in 1798 and Barruel in 1797 were to charge the despised clan of the Freemasons and the Illuminati of seeking not only to subvert the temporal and spiritual powers of the time, but further to bring about moral decadence and corruption of the young, to indulge in masturbatory and homosexual perversions in the back rooms of their alcohol-soaked lodges from which women were prohibited, and finally, literally to practise the worship of the Devil (Luciano, 2003: 271). In a similar vein, even in the 21st century, Catherine O'Brien and Phillips (2005: 256) claimed to be the victim of flagrant sexual outrages perpetrated by leading figures of the New World Order (George W Bush and Dick Cheney were among them) in the Tomb of the Yale University 'Skull & Bones' secret society or in the Bohemian Grove in San Francisco. Such perversions and insatiable sexual appetites together with other deviant practices attributed to scapegoat groups constitute an unmistakable characteristic of conspiracist myths (Giry, 2014: 205–207). Nothing is beyond the capacity of conspiracy theorists to fantasize, with their adversaries being accused variously of paedophilia, necrophilia or even zoophilia. The demonological nature of the myth becomes apparent when the scapegoats are suspected of being in very essence diabolical, the incarnation of Evil. Thus, 'the Jesuit is excluded from humanity, cast out into the unspeakable realm of absolute evil, his malevolence and capacity for harm being such as not to be able to have a human origin' (Leroy, 1992: 186). In respect of the Jews, Marie Bonaparte (1946: 134) reported in her book *Mythes de guerre* [Myths of Wartime] that they were held in conspiracist discourse to be the Devil incarnate. This, for example, is what re-emerges around certain conspiracist themes associated with the 2001 attacks in the United States (Taïeb, 2003: 10). This demonological linkage is typical of modern conspiracist theme formation in which the scapegoat is projected as a devilish 'superman' (Hofstadter, 1996: 31), capable of every form of ignominy and turpitude in the mortal struggle in which he is engaged in order to sap the moral, political, economic and social foundations of the society in question. They perfectly embody the diabolical causality highlighted by Poliakov (1980: 247). The myth then exercises a function of rationalization and simplification to the extreme of the historical process that is underway at the time. By substituting for the complexity and roughness of social, economic and political relations a single cause in the form of a unique scapegoat pulling all the strings from the shadows, the conspiracist myth provides a narrative which is in appearance coherent and symbolically reassuring and which eventually relies on an esoteric cryptology. As Karl Popper (1969: 341–342) pointed out, conspiracism constitutes an erroneous medium for interpreting history in the sense that it sees 'whatever happens in society-including things which people as a rule dislike-such as wars, unemployment, poverty

or shortages, are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups [...] in its modern form, it is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions'. An erroneous means whose function as a process of rationalization within public opinion that should not be minimized by those wishing to study conspiracism as a social phenomenon, notably where this process occurs at the heart of contemporary societies which are complex, globalized and in the midst of structural political, economic and moral crises.

This rationalization function finds propitious ground for its expression in the casting of the myth as a narrative through prominent texts. In this respect can be cited the *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* [History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea] by William of Tyre (12th century) in relation to the Knights Templar conspiracy, the *Monita secreta Societatis Jesu* [The Secret Instructions of the Society of Jesus] (1614) of Hieronim Zahorowski (Kreis, 2012: 23–27) for the Jesuit myth or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Bernstein, 1971; Curtiss, 1942; Demichelis, 1997; Taguieff, 1992) as a breviary of anti-Semitism. All these assemble the full set of charges levelled at the scapegoat groups: the blind pursuit of wealth, the incessant search for power, the cult of secrecy, Satanist practices and sexual perversions. Above all, these texts firstly allow substance to be given to the simplistic and reductionist meta-narratives of the historical process by suggesting that all disasters have at their origin a single, diabolical and omnipotent enemy, but one which can adopt several different guises: Judeo-Masonry, Judeo-Bolshevism or Americano-Zionism. Secondly, by revealing the occult secrets of the conspirators, these texts offer their readers means to defend themselves against a threat which henceforth is exposed to the light of day. Thirdly, they serve to legitimize acts of persecution undertaken against the scapegoats. Fourthly, a mobilization and group-assembly function can be distinguished in that these texts, in particular the *Protocols*, constitute an immediately identifiable sign of conversion to the conspiracist cause. Fifthly and finally, these texts serve a function of renewing the persuasive appeal of conspiracism in the world by supplying an apparently authoritative narrative giving credence to modes of reading that are apparently fantastic or even magic and sacred or mystical and mythological. They activate a function of reification of the social. The scapegoat groups, deemed to be omniscient and omnipotent, are held to manipulate the art of simulation and dissimulation, becoming the single and unique cause of all social and societal ills.

The art of secrecy

The cult of secrecy is the fourth typical characteristic of conspiracist theories. The Jesuits, the Templars or the Freemasons are certainly a minority in society, but conspiracism asserts that their hold over society in all fields is measureless; they are believed to have infiltrated every trade guild, every social class or category, occupying all positions of dominance and exercising a malign influence over the highest spheres of the state. 'The Jesuit is uncountable and indiscernible because his nature is one of dissimulation, because hypocrisy is a tenet of his morality, an obligatory state of his strategy of conquest' (Leroy, 1992: 194). Perfidy and duplicity are held to be consubstantial with his diabolical character. The Jesuits, just as later were the Freemasons in Mamy's 1943 propaganda film *Forces occultes* [Occult Powers], for example, were said to resort to the use of formulae, emblems and a coded or esoteric language and symbolism which only the initiates of the order were capable of interpreting. Closer to our time, the Skull & Bones society is alleged to have as its hidden objective the imposition of a New World Order of which it would be the regent; in order to achieve this, through a concealed network linking 20 or 30 families (Sutton, 2002: 22), they are thought to have successfully penetrated the nerve centres of political, justice, media and economic powers and institutions in order to become lodged at their very hearts and to subvert them.⁶ 'During my senior year I joined Skull and Bones, a secret society; so secret, I can't say anything more',

wrote even President George W Bush (2008: 76),² thereby adding even more grist to the mill of the conspiracists.

The reification of the scapegoats

A fifth paradigmatic trait of the conspiracist myth may be distilled through a function of reification of the scapegoat group. The latter are permanently dehumanized through the use of machine or animal metaphors. Characterized this way, the Jesuits no longer form a human society or religious order, but are cast as a soulless machine, incapable of any emotion or compassion whatever towards others. They constitute a machine through their capacity to initiate on the planetary scale a gigantic plan for universal dominance extending seamlessly over several centuries if not millennia (Leroy, 1992: 229). Similarly, in Icke's (2007: 1–18) writing, the reptilian conspiracy is the work of a genuine machine in which cold-blooded individuals incapable of any emotion act like computers connected to a Wi-Fi network. This same mechanistic approach underlies the conspiracist reading of the French Revolution that is found in Cochin, for example (Brinton, 1965: 80; Porset, 1990).

This process of dehumanization also passes via the application of animal metaphors, or zoomorphism. The Jesuits (Leroy, 1992: 210–224) or the Jews (Afoumado, 2008) are caricatured in the form of hydras, chameleons, spiders, snakes or foxes, all animals conveying the notion of craftiness and duplicity or a rampant hold over the world. Moreover, even when the scapegoats are represented in human form, they reflect a well-defined morphological type. The Jesuits are depicted under two such types. The first, relatively marginal, type is the embodiment of the lead character of Molière's *Tartuffe* (1664), a pot-bellied, lubricious and concupiscent priest. Such a figure is presented as being an Epicurean, yielding easily to the pleasures of the table and the flesh (Gosse, 2012). The second image, much more current in popular literature, is that of the 'fanatical monk', a truly loathsome creature who 'abominates the world and its pleasures [...] he is tall and gaunt with thin lips and blazing eye, for, lest we forget, he is as hypocritical as he is fanatical' (Leroy, 1992: 205). The Jesuit is portrayed as being of weak physical constitution, bearing his treachery and insensitivity to the things of the world in his very morphology and the austerity of his black garments; everything about him gives material form to the terror and fright which he brings to bear on society. Further, his intrinsic and irrefutable perversion may be read directly in the physiognomy of his angular face, as described by Jean-Gaspard Lavater (1820: 54).

Of all the physiognomies of priests and monks, there is perhaps none that is more recognizable, more pronounced than that of the Jesuit. The eyes of Jesuits have become proverbial [...]. The forehead will almost always be vaulted and of great capacity, without being either compact or vigorously defined. Most frequently the nose is long, curved and very fleshy toward the tip. The chin is broad, not excessively fat, but gathered up in a lump. Add to that faded eyes and sharply etched lips.

This image also brings to mind the way in which the Jew was represented in the anti-Semitic caricatures of the 1930s and 1940s or in the symbolism associated with the alleged Communist conspiracy in the 20th century.

A process of hybridization and creolization

The final characteristic of modern conspiracist myths is a process of hybridization and creolization (Giry, 2014: 22). Whereas the 18th century had been that of alleging plots fomented by the Freemasons or the Jesuits, the 20th and 21st centuries, inheriting a movement begun in the 19th century by the emergence of the Judeo-Masonic myth, are those of the supposed mega-conspiracy, that is to say, a single plot which is universal in time and space. In effect, and especially

since the second half of the 20th century, the innumerable conspiracy theories generated over that time have coalesced into a gigantic maelstrom in which the official enemies are, in fact, merely the twin facets of a single process of domination through which governments are keeping their populations in subjection, where the international organizations and secret or highly discreet societies take part in imposing a New World Order, and where in the final analysis, power is concentrated at the apex of the pyramid in the hands of a very small number of unknown individuals. Under this scenario, the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Freemasons, Communists, the Jews or shape-shifting aliens, whatever scapegoat group is identified, all are currently gathered together in a confused amalgam of jumbled theories which are scarcely intelligible and are even contradictory. This is what we are proposing to call a catch-all conspiracy theory (Giry, 2014: 294), where each conspiracy theorist is open to finding and assembling from various distinct source elements which reinforce his own beliefs. Thus, the most recent avatar of the Jesuit myth consists of associating the Society of Jesus with extra-terrestrial entities of a reptilian type in Ufologist claims which ‘often reproduce the biases of the nineteenth-century American nativism, concentrating on the malevolence of the three groups that obsessed nativists in that century: Catholics, Freemasons, and Jews’ (Barkun, 2013: 136). Similarly, for Nesta Webster (1921, 1924), the plan of the Illuminati was embedded in a long tradition extending the conspiratorial intent back to the beginning of the modern world, starting from the Jewish Cabbala and the sect of the Assassins, and passing by way of the Templars and Rosicrucians through to the Freemasons and Bolsheviks, a conglomeration of elements which, according to her, composed the roots of the ‘true Jewish peril’ of her time.

In summary, in the 21st century, this process of hybridization of the various strands of conspiracy theory seems to have reached a stage where it is impossible to distinguish a purely anti-Semitic conspiracy theory from a strictly anti-Masonic one. The time is no longer that of distinct conspiracy theories, but one of general conspiracism. Only the agents believed to be driving the mega-conspiracy can be named: Zionism, the British oligarchy, the reptilians, the Freemasons, the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, the Bush family, the UN, Wall Street, the Trilateral Commission, the Bohemian Grove club or the Skull & Bones society. It is a list of names and institutions which the public knows well, which the huge expansion of the internet and the renewal of interest in conspiracist themes, notably after the 9/11 attacks or those in Boston in 2013 and Paris in 2015 have not ceased to add to.

Julien Giry

(*Université de Rennes I*)

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. In fact, ‘Winston Parva’ is a name contrived by the authors to preserve the anonymity of the district of Leicester under their study. See Elias and Scotson (1994: 1).
2. The quoted reference is to the 2008 French translation of Bush’s 1999 book *A Charge to Keep*, in which he describes becoming a member of the Skull & Bones society while in his final year as a student at Yale in the 1960s [translator’s note].

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