

CONSPIRACY MYTHS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy myths have been a common, often influential, and sometimes dominant feature of political culture (certainly in Europe and America) in recent centuries. A stream of examples could be cited, from the Popish Plot scares of the early modern period, through the anti-conspiratorial rhetoric prevailing at the time of the American and French Revolutions, through the nineteenth century with its anti-Masonic near-orthodoxy on the Right and its anti-Jesuit near-orthodoxy on the Left, through the Dreyfus Affair with its spectacular free-for-all of conflicting and interlocking conspiratorial theories, through the sinister heyday of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* after the First World War, through Stalinism and McCarthyism, to the conspiracy theories of extreme Right and extreme Left and of the occultist fringe today. Jews, Freemasons, Illuminati, Jesuits, Communists, Capitalists, Trotskyists, Zionists, the British Establishment or the French Two Hundred Families - all these, and others, including the supposed members of hyphenated or composite entities known only to conspiracy theorists, such as 'Judaeo-Masonry', have recurrently been cast in the role of conspiratorial prime movers of history or current affairs.

The purpose of this essay is not to give a historical survey of conspiracy theories, nor is it to attempt an explanation (psychological, sociological or political) of their past or present, nor to assess their impact on political or other behaviour. It is simply to do some of the necessary preparatory groundwork for such

I should like to thank Professor Norman Hampson, Dr Christopher Andrew and Dr John Walsh for kindly commenting on this essay, which was originally delivered as a paper at the study day on 'Le Mythe contemporain' at La Maison Française, Oxford, on 20 February 1988.

projects, by describing, in more detail than is sometimes given, just what conspiracy theories are, and how they work.

Already, I am using two terms - 'conspiracy myth' and 'conspiracy theory' - which call for definition. A myth is a story which people take to be true, and which they use as the key to an understanding of the way things are or happen. Conspiracy myths are *historical* myths, by which I mean that the stories they tell are typically set not in some primordial and clearly extra-historical mythical time of origin, nor in the self-recapitulating time of eschatology,¹ but in the datable past, in something which at least superficially resembles historical time. A conspiracy myth tells the supposedly true and supposedly historical story of a conspiracy and of the events and disastrous effects to which it has given rise. The interpretation of fresh events or developments (either past ones in retrospect or new ones arising in the present) in the light of such a myth, and in such a way as to assimilate them to the myth, is what I mean by a conspiracy theory. In other words, the term 'conspiracy myth' refers to a pre-existing structure, the term 'conspiracy theory' to the use of that structure in the practical analysis of history or current affairs.

I want to ask two questions: 1) What sort of an explanation or interpretation is it when events are explained or interpreted in terms of a conspiracy myth? 2) How do such explanations or interpretations actually work?

The Properties of Conspiracy Myth: Intentionalism, Dualism, Occultism

My starting-point in answering the first question is a definition of 'conspiracy'. I am not here concerned with the term's linguistic origins, nor with the history of its past meanings, nor with how it is used in a specifically legal context, but simply with what we mean when we use the term in everyday usage or in terms like 'conspiracy myth' and 'conspiracy theory'.

For these purposes, I think, a conspiracy may be defined as a collaboration, intended to be secret, between a number of people, for the purpose of realizing a shared plan. Conspiracies, in other words, are by definition deliberate, concerted, secretive. You cannot conspire on your own, or publicly, or accidentally (though you can, of course, be an unsuspecting tool of a conspiracy by other people).

Defined in these terms, conspiracy may perfectly well be regarded as a social or political tactic available to all and used by any number of different groups to attain any number of different ends. This is not, however, how conspiracy is presented in

¹ It is, of course, possible for the events recited in a conspiracy myth to be placed in an eschatological context. For an example, see my remarks on the anti-Jesuit beliefs of early nineteenth-century 'Jansenists' (Cubitt 1984: 305-54).

conspiracy myths. A conspiracy myth tells the story of one conspiracy as if it were the only one, as if conspiracy were the monopoly and the distinguishing behavioural characteristic of a single group, perpetually opposed to the rest of society and driven by some abnormally insatiable passion, like the lust for world domination or the desire to destroy civilized society. It is to conspiracy of this sort that conspiracy theorists attribute events.

What sort of account of the world is it, then, that conspiracy myths offer - and that conspiracy theorists, by their analyses, accept and perpetuate? It seems to me to have three major properties.

First, of course, it is an *intentionalist* account, one which explains events as the product of intentions. As Abbé Barruel, one of the founding fathers of modern conspiracy theories, put it in 1797:

We will affirm and demonstrate that of which it is important that the peoples and their leaders should not be ignorant; we will tell them: In this French Revolution, everything, down to its most appalling crimes, everything was foreseen, premeditated, contrived, resolved on, ordained in advance: everything was the product of the deepest villainy, for everything was prepared and brought about by men who alone held the thread of conspiracies long woven in the secret societies, and who knew how to choose and hasten the moments favourable to their plots (Barruel 1973 [1797-8], I: 42).²

Viewed from this angle, conspiracy theories are about causes. Their roots in broader currents of causal theory are well brought about by the American historian, Gordon S. Wood. Wood argues that men of the Enlightenment sought to base a science of human affairs upon the same paradigm of mechanistic causality that the scientific revolution of the late seventeenth century had established in the physical sciences: one which excluded both divine intervention and chance, and posited an indissoluble connection between effect and cause. Since they were unwilling to sacrifice the principle of free will, which they believed to be the necessary basis for morality, they could extend this paradigm to the human sciences only by assigning to human motives the role of causes. The notion of a moral resemblance between effects and causes thus became established: good social effects were assumed to derive from good human intentions, bad effects from bad intentions. Since these intentions were not always superficially obvious, they often had to be deduced from the effects which caught the eye: the earlier Puritan alertness to discern God's will beneath the surface of events gave way to an 'Enlightened' readiness to detect hidden human designs. In this way, according to Wood, eighteenth-century secular thinking was 'structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, necessary and rational' (Wood 1982: 411).

The subsequent recession of the eighteenth-century notions of

² My translation.

causality described by Wood may well have helped make conspiracy theories less universally acceptable. Nevertheless, the need to find causes and the habit of identifying them with intentions remain distinctive features of the thinking of those who still find such theories attractive. As one of the rank-and-file National Front members interviewed by Michael Billig in the mid-1970s put it, when explaining his acceptance of a conspiratorial explanation of current affairs, 'wherever there is an effect, there's always a cause. And for a long time I used to see the way this country was going. I thought: "why the devil is it? Why? There must be a cause."' (Billig 1978: 316)

To stress the intentionalism of conspiracy myths is to dwell on their explanatory function. That they also have a descriptive function is clear when we consider their second property, which I would call that of *dualism*. The relationship between the effectively non-conspiratorial majority of society and the perpetually conspiring minority naturally lends itself to formulation in terms of morally absolute binary opposition: Good against Evil, Christianity against Anti-Christianity, the Free World against Communism, Revolution against Counter-Revolution. Leo XIII's encyclical *Humanum genus* of 1884, which gave a virtual seal of approval to a whole tradition of anti-Masonic conspiracy theory, put it thus:

After the human race, through the envious efforts of Satan, had had the misfortune to turn away from God... it became divided into two distinct and mutually hostile camps. One of these steadily combats for truth and virtue, the other for all that is opposed to virtue and truth (Leo XIII 1952 [1884]: 1).³

It was, of course, the latter camp that the Pope considered was gathering in modern times under the leadership of Freemasonry.

This binary vision in conspiracy myths is commonly reinforced in two ways. First, by emphasizing, or at least implying, the natural unity and cohesiveness of the non-conspiratorial majority: their readiness, if freed from conspiratorial interference, to engage collectively in whatever is the crucial social and moral endeavour of the times, be it building the socialist society, living the Christian life, carrying the White Man's burden, or continuing the traditions of the Founding Fathers. 'Our great fatherland is joyously flourishing and growing. The fields of innumerable collective farms are rich with a golden harvest' (People's Commissariat of Justice 1936: 120), observed State Prosecutor Vyshinsky, going on to acclaim the 'indestructible, genuine unity and solidarity of the masses of the people with the great Stalin, with our Central Committee, with our Soviet Government' (ibid.: 122). This unity was what rendered so despicable the plotting of 'a contemptible, insignificant, impotent group of traitors and murderers' (ibid.: 119), the Trotskyite conspiracy in one of its successive embodiments, the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre. In

³ The translation used here is by the anti-Masonic author, Rev. Denis Fahey.

portraying conspiracy as directed against a real or potential moral harmony of this sort, conspiracy myths offer excuses for the non-appearance of Utopia.

Secondly, the binary vision is reinforced by the implication that whatever cannot be harmoniously assimilated to the pole of Good must be viewed as a cunningly laid stepping-stone towards the pole of Evil and thus as an integral part of the Evil conspiracy. Protestantism and deism are lumped together with atheism; liberalism and internationalism become branches of Communism. Thus an editorial by John Tyndall in the British neo-Nazi periodical *Spearhead* in 1966, entitled 'The Many Faces of Bolshevism', asserted:

The Communist of these times seldom works under the overt banner of the Communist party. Instead he seeks to spread Communist ideas by the use of popular phrases and the appeal of popular sentiments. His weapons range over a vast number of respectable and apparently non-political institutions and bodies (Tyndall 1966a: 2).

Tyndall went on to conclude that 'the "humanitarian liberal" is in fact Bolshevism's favourite face today. The saintly look of "love" hides the dark heart of hate. *Don't let it fool you!*' (ibid.; original emphasis).

This last sentence raises a further point. The conspiracy theorist believes that the non-conspiring majority is being fooled, on a colossal scale, and that being fooled is the key to all its problems. As John Roberts writes in his study of *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*,

At the heart of the mythology lies the recognition of delusion. Its central image is of a community unaware of its true nature. Apparently self-conscious and self-regulating, it is, unknown to itself, in fact directed by concealed hands (1972: 353).

This brings us to the third property of conspiracy myths, which may be referred to as their *occultism*. Conspiracy myths encourage the drawing of a sharp distinction between the appearance of human affairs and their true nature. Any conspiracy theory involves a claim to provide access to a reality which is, by its nature, hidden. We find this expressed, in somewhat titillating form, in an advertisement for a number of works emanating from the stable of a veteran specialist in the genre, Henry Coston:

Are you one of those who like to understand? One of those who insist on knowing more than the newspaper with its big headlines ever tells you? Do you want to cast your eye behind the scenes, to discover who is pulling the strings? In a word, do you have a character, a personality capable of overcoming all the factitiousness and frivolity of our epoch?⁴

⁴ My translation. The advertisement, entitled 'L'histoire secrète

If so, these books are for you. The image of string-pulling used here is one which conspiracy theorists find useful for conveying their sense of concealed reality; that of sapping or mining is another (with the emphasis this time more on danger than on control).

What is concealed by the conspiracy's secrecy is not simply the conspiracy's own existence, but the way things really are in the world. The hidden truth which the conspiracy theorist purports to reveal has, as my earlier argument implies, both explanatory and descriptive properties. It reveals both the secret causes of surface events and the true - binary - alignment of forces, which makes both sense and nonsense of the ostensible alignments of conventional politics: nonsense, in that it shows that these are not the true alignments; sense, in that it shows how their appearance has been deliberately contrived for sinister purposes. Also implicit in each conspiracy theory, of course, is the notion that, if only the conspiracy could be fully exposed, it would become powerless, and the disparity between appearance and reality would disappear. Control over events and over society would return from the hidden depths to the surface, to the hands of those - be they the people or some paternalistic authority - with whom it should reside.

Any conspiracy theory, I would suggest, necessarily has the three properties I have identified - intentionalism, dualism, occultism - implicit within it. But it is the conspiracy myth that binds these properties together, not any prior and necessary connection or affinity between them. Their psychological and cultural roots are likely to be quite different. What makes a man a passionate intentionalist, for example, need not make him an equally passionate dualist or occultist, though his desire to have a solid intentionalist explanation of events, with an impressive weight of tradition behind it, may prepare him to accept a certain level of dualism and occultism in the myth which provides that explanation. It is not surprising, then, that some conspiracy theorists play down one or other aspect - that some conspiracies are presented in a way which makes them seem less secret, or less rigidly controlled, or less irredeemably wicked than others.

Efforts to provide a historical or any other explanation of conspiracy theories' appeal and durability do well to bear the implications of this in mind. To take one example, it is possible, while accepting Wood's sensitive argument about the philosophical basis of eighteenth-century conspiracy theories, to question what seems to be the implication at the end of his article: that once the intentionalism of the Enlightenment began to break down, in the face of the sheer magnitude and complexity of the events of the French Revolution, conspiracy theories were bound, after an initial period of desperate extravagance (the moment of Barruel and others)

de notre temps', is to be found on page 173 of *Prélats et Franc-maçons*, a work published by Coston under the pseudonym of Georges Virebeau (Virebeau 1978).

to recede gradually to the lunatic fringe.⁵ Quite simply, this recession shows very little sign of having happened during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; conspiracy theories became more elaborate, but without becoming less influential. This may well be because, whatever the Revolution did to people's causal assumptions, it did little to dissuade anyone from occultism, and a great deal, through its aggressive insistence that it was replacing an old and corrupt world with an entirely new one, and through the genuinely dramatic transformations that accompanied that claim, to condition post-Revolutionary Europeans to think in dualist terms of old against new, Revolution against Counter-Revolution. Generalizing wildly, one might see an eighteenth-century commitment to intentionalism yielding to a nineteenth-century Manicheism as the principal underpinning of conspiracy theories.

Whether one does see that or not, it seems clear that an understanding of conspiracy theories' variability, of conspiracy myths' flexibility, should underlie any attempt to account for their influence, either in general or in particular circumstances. We have so far, however, explored only one sort of variability. We encounter another if we turn to the second question posed earlier in this paper, and try to give an account of how conspiracy theories actually work in practice. How, given the prior existence of a conspiracy myth, is the action of the conspiracy which it describes detected in fresh sets of events?

The Mechanics of Conspiracy Theory: Conspirator-Centred and Plan-Centred Styles

On the basis of the definition of a conspiracy which I suggested earlier, it can be said that any conspiracy contains three elements in conjunction: 1) a *conspiratorial plan* (this may be more or less detailed. The planning may extend not simply to the conspiracy's ultimate aims, but also to the strategic means of realizing them, and even to more routine tactics); 2) a *conspiratorial group* (this is sometimes a group defined by its members' involvement in the conspiracy, for example, the Illuminati; sometimes one with a prior identity, for example, the Jews); and 3) an *effort at secrecy* (this may be designed to conceal the conspirators' identity, or the nature of their plan, or both).

The third of these elements - secretiveness - is a general characteristic common to, and similar in, all conspiracies (though it may protect different aspects of the conspiracy in different instances). The other two elements, however, are specific to particular cases: each conspiracy (whether real or imagined) receives its distinct identity from a unique pairing between one particular group and one particular plan. To attribute a given event to a particular conspiracy, we must be able to specify both these elements and to

⁵ This is my reading of Wood 1982: 431-2 and 441.

connect them both somehow or other with that event.

So long as one has no notion, or only vague notions, of who might be conspiring, what they might be conspiring about, or what sorts of things would need to be conspired about in order to happen, this sort of attribution is quite difficult to make. With the aid of a conspiracy myth, it becomes much easier. For, with such a myth, two things are given in advance. The first is the essential unity of all effective conspiracy, under a regime of monopoly: if something is perceived to be the product of conspiracy, the question 'which conspiracy?' will not arise, since only one conspiracy of any significance is considered possible. The second is the indissolubility of the connection between the conspiratorial group and the conspiratorial plan: it is no longer considered that either might exist without the other. It follows that the presence of either element can be deduced from the observed presence of the other: it is no longer necessary to have direct evidence of both before particular events can be laid at the door of the conspiracy. Once a particular conspiracy myth is established, in other words, it becomes possible to assimilate fresh events to it by two quite different, though not mutually exclusive, means. Thus, to take a concrete example, the claim that François Damiens had been an agent of the Jesuits when he tried to assassinate Louis XV in 1757 was supported in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by two different types of argument. On the one hand, circumstantial evidence was amassed, purporting to show connections between Damiens himself and the Jesuits. It was pointed out, for example, that he originated from the town of Arras, whose inhabitants were notorious for their susceptibility to Jesuit influence, that he had once been a Jesuit *pensionnaire*, and that Jesuits were reported to have been seen in plain clothes leaving the back door of their residence in the rue Saint-Antoine at the time of his attack. On the other hand, on the basis of prior attributions to the Jesuits of a whole string of earlier regicidal *attentats* (notably those against Henri IV), it was argued that Damiens' crime was one of a notoriously and typically Jesuit sort.⁶

The two types of argument used in the case of Damiens are characteristic of the reasoning of conspiracy theorists more generally. It is through them, and through the interaction between them, that the content of conspiracy myths is inflated and their pretensions to make sense of things enhanced. It may help us to observe this process in practice if we isolate, for purposes of comparison, two styles or ways of presenting or developing the sense of being confronted with a conspiracy, which recur throughout the literature and rhetoric of conspiracy theories, and each of which crystallizes around one of these two types of argument. I will refer to these as the 'conspirator centred' and the 'plan-centred' styles.

⁶ See Monglave and Chalas 1825: 305-6 for some of these arguments. They are, however, typical of a whole tradition of anti-Jesuit writing. Van Kley 1984: 86-8 surveys some of the evidence used to incriminate the Jesuits in the immediate aftermath of the assassination attempt.

In the conspirator-centred style, the conspiracy theorist gives one to understand that his ability to make sense of things is dependent upon what he knows, or can find out, about people. Consider, for example, Hitler's account, in *Mein Kampf*, of his own conversion from a 'weak-kneed cosmopolitan' into an anti-Semite. This allegedly happened when he became aware that the commanding positions in various areas of Viennese life - notably the press, the arts, prostitution, the white slave traffic and Social Democratic politics - were occupied by Jews:

Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it?

If you cut even cautiously into such an abcess, you found, like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light - a kike (1969 [1925-6]: 53).

Hitler, then, wishes his readers to believe that what enabled him to see what was happening in Vienna (and, refracted through that, what was happening more generally) was essentially his ability to recognize Jews as Jews. The labelling of conspirators and suspects on the basis of supposed membership of, or affinity or connections with, the conspiratorial group is central to the 'conspirator-centred' style. A work like Edouard Drumont's *La France juive*, the classic best-seller of late nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, relies heavily on this style, as in the following passages:

The 4th of September [1870], as was to be expected, placed in power the French Jews: the Gambettas, the Simons, the Picards, the Magnins, to whom, if one is to believe Mr Bismarck, who is generally considered pretty well informed, one must add Jules Favre. Hendlé, Jules Favre's secretary, is Jewish. Camille Sée, the secretary general of the Ministry of the Interior, is Jewish (1887, I: 387).

If the contracts to supply the army had been retained by [the manufacturers of] Besançon, there was a cause, and that cause was a Jew, the Jew Veil-Picard, the famous Veil-Picard whom we encounter at every moment in this book, wherever anyone is speculating, or jobbing or plotting a financial affair (1887 II: 161).⁷

The strong odour of card-index in these passages emphasizes the general tendency of writers in the 'conspirator-centred' style to cultivate a pragmatic, empirical air. Such writers pose not as theoretical interpreters of history and society, but as alert observers and piecers-together of tell-tale detail. They ask for, and tell other people, the answers to such questions as these: who is a Jew or a Freemason? Who has a Jesuit confessor or a Communist lover? Who had a meeting with whom? They like to map human networks of evil influence, and to compile lists: of Freemasons in

⁷ My translations.

public life, of Communists in the American film industry, of old Etonians in the Cabinet, of Jewish Bolsheviks, and so on. In short, dedicated practitioners of the 'conspirator-centred' style soar above the terrain of history and current affairs like birds of prey, not to assess the topography but to pick out the vermin.

In the plan-centred style, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the layout of events; it is in the things that happen, rather than in the people who are around when they happen, that a sinister pattern is first detected. The contrast between the two styles can be illustrated by comparing the familiar efforts to demonstrate the 'Jewishness' of the Russian Revolution by listing prominent Jewish participants with the following passage from a minor conspiracy classic of the 1930s, Emmanuel Malynski and Leon de Poncins' *La Guerre occulte*:

The aristocrat Lvov, the learned bourgeois Miliukov, the revolutionary lawyer Kerensky, the terrorist Chernov, Lenin and Trotsky, Stalin and Company were and are only the successive executors of the same uninterrupted original plan.

The narrators and historians who speak of the uncertain steps of the Russian Revolution up to the arrival of Lenin are in the deepest of error, and this is because they consider it at its beginning in terms of the interest of the middle class, subsequently in terms of the interest of the peasantry and finally in terms of the interest of the proletariat. But if they considered it from beginning to end solely and exclusively in terms of international Judaism - which required the successive elimination of the dynasty, of militarism, of the propertied aristocracy, of the participating bourgeoisie and of small peasant property - they would have no difficulty in establishing that the Russian Revolution is a dynamic continuum, meticulously regulated with admirable coherence, and that no movement of elimination was ever carried out without a previous movement of elimination having already suppressed all risks (1936: 213-4).⁸

The way Malynski and de Poncins talk about conspiracy, actual conspirators hardly seem necessary. For them, it is not the observable actors of modern history that are Jewish so much as that history's whole course; the Kerenskys and Lenins are merely the instruments of a plan which originates outside them and whose operation is detected simply by watching the direction in which events are tending.

Not all specimens of the 'plan-centred' style are as purely and blatantly teleological as this. Conspiracy myths order the conspiratorial group's past misdeeds into a check-list of symptoms, by the use of which the conspiracy theorist considers it possible to detect the group's presence and action on subsequent occasions. Thus, for example, regicide and a casuistical permissiveness in

⁸ My translation.

moral theology have been taken as sure signs of Jesuit influence, and John Tyndall observed in the liberal society of the 1960s a string of 'secret tools of the Bolshevik conspiracy against civilization', among them 'the destruction of private enterprise', 'totalitarian thought control', 'the levelling-down of education' and 'the breakdown of family life' (1966b: 4 and 5). Sometimes, such a symptomatology is enshrined in a specific text, which conspiracy theorists present as the conspiratorial plan itself, or part of it. The most famous such text, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, has provided a model of conspiracy whose methods include capitalist manipulation, the impoverishment of the aristocracy, the instigation of war and revolution, the encouragement of vice and the packing of underground railway systems with high explosive.⁹ Another alleged blueprint, the so-called *Monita Secreta* of the Jesuits, originally fabricated in the early seventeenth century but still influential in the nineteenth, places particular emphasis on the Jesuits' efforts to persuade rich widows to part with their fortunes.¹⁰ Conspiracy theorists who give credence to such texts usually justify doing so by arguments similar to that advanced by Henry Ford in 1921: 'The only statement I care to make about the Protocols is that they fit in with what is going on. They are sixteen years old and they have fitted the world situation up to this time.'¹¹ The tightness of the perceived fit between the conspiratorial plan contained in the text and the pattern of events (in the case of the *Protocols*, such events as the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the League of Nations) is taken simultaneously to confirm the text's own claims to authenticity and to make sense of 'what is going on'.

If we isolate them as I have done, the 'conspirator-centred' and the 'plan-centred' styles seem to show us conspiracy theorists in very different moods: in the one case vindictive, inquisitorial, keen to denounce, bearing the promise of witch-craze and Stalinist purge; in the other, gentler, more scholarly, more concerned to understand what happens than to focus animosity. It is seldom, however, that either style is sustained in anything like a pure state. The chief purpose in distinguishing them is to observe their interaction.

⁹ On the *Protocols* and their history, see Cohn 1967. The standard English version of the text is the translation by V. Marsden (1972 [1921]). Inasmuch as the *Protocols* contain not only a description/prescription of conspiratorial tactics, but also a prediction of political and social developments under the influence of those tactics, the interpretations of current affairs which they inspire often resemble those inspired by eschatological texts.

¹⁰ The *Monita* may be conveniently found (in French) in Larousse 1865-90, vol. ix: 961-4. For a discussion of their nineteenth-century influence, see Cubitt 1984: 497-509.

¹¹ Quoted (from the *New York World*, 17 February 1921) in the 'Introduction' to Marsden 1972 [1921]: 12.

There are few better descriptions of the way in which reasoning built up in the plan-centred style can issue suddenly in the identification of alleged conspirators than the critical account which the young François Guizot gave in 1821 of the Bourbon authorities' abusive resort, in conspiracy trials, to what were known as *faits généraux*. Justice demanded, Guizot wrote, that people should only be convicted if the existence of a conspiracy could be proved on the basis of evidence which concerned them directly. Unable to prove this, yet anxious to find conspirators in order to justify political repression, the prosecuting authorities simply concocted a supposed conspiracy out of circumstances (*faits généraux*) many of which had nothing to do with the accused, and then, on the basis of some often quite accidental connection with one part of this construction, associated the accused with the whole of it (Guizot 1821: 38-9).

When politics, alarmed over such and such a set of *faits généraux*, requests justice to investigate them in order to look for crimes whose elements it suspects are contained within them, it is inevitable that justice will come across men and acts which, while completely unrelated to the crime it is seeking, are not at all so to the *faits généraux* amongst which it is seeking it.... To encounter a man where one is seeking a crime, and to be tempted, because one encounters him there, to proceed against him: the passage between these two things is short and slippery. Pushed on by politics, justice has often passed along it (*ibid.*: 48-50).¹²

This 'short and slippery passage' from finding a man entangled in a conspiratorial pattern to labelling him a conspirator has been just as often trodden by conspiracy theorists. So has the equally short and slippery one in the opposite direction, from labelling someone a conspirator to imagining that all of his acts are part of the conspiracy (and hence, by extension, that analogous acts by others suggest that those others are also involved in it).

It is clear that conspiracy myths, inasmuch as they form the basis for conspiracy theories, have an inbuilt tendency to expand through these sorts of associational shift. Bankers become Jews, anticlericals become Freemasons or *maçonnisants*, Liberalism becomes creeping Communism, Catholic piety becomes Jesuit manipulation, and so on. Spirals of guilt by association can be built up, in which actions or doctrines compromise people and people compromise actions or doctrines with equal facility. This can happen either slowly, over the long life of a conspiracy myth, or, under certain conditions, suddenly and uncontrollably, in an explosion of conspiracy theory with devastating social or political consequences, as happened, for example, in Revolutionary France or in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Once the existence of a far-reaching Trotskyite conspiracy against the Soviet regime was established as myth, and the stirring-up of opposition to the Party General Line as

¹² My translation.

represented by Stalin identified as one of its chosen methods, the mere fact of opposition became sufficient proof of conspiracy. Indeed, the opposition did not even have to be explicit: in a classic display of teleological reasoning, the mere expression of views which allegedly *ought* logically to have led one into opposition could be taken to constitute 'objective' opposition, and hence conspiracy. The prosecution in the Moscow show trials was able to rely on a combination of 'plan-centred' reasoning of this sort, used to incriminate prominent individuals like Bukharin with more obvious 'conspirator-centred' methods, which required the accused to be persuaded or forced to denounce each other and to admit to meetings which established links in the alleged conspiratorial network.¹³

Conclusion

Examples like this remind us that the two styles - conspirator-centred and plan-centred - are not two different types of conspiracy theory, any more than the three aspects of conspiracy myth identified earlier constituted different types of myth. They are simply styles, rhetorical ways of expressing different emphases within a structure which neither of them on its own adequately represents. One style concentrates on whom to blame, the other on what to blame them for. The impulses to which they correspond - inculpation on the one hand, clarification or interpretation on the other - are in this context neither independent of each other nor opposed, but closely and dynamically connected. The obsessive reading of sinister patterns in events supports and encourages the insatiable hunt for guilty persons. Nevertheless, it is not the same thing.

Much remains to be explained about why the tendency of conspiracy theorists is sometimes to go from the general to the particular, and sometimes from the particular to the general. Why is the message of conspiracy theory sometimes stated in the form of Whittaker Chambers's assertion that 'Alger Hiss is only one name that stands for the whole Communist penetration of government',¹⁴ and sometimes in the inverse form, that the name of one of those involved in the Communist penetration of government is Alger Hiss? What are the circumstances - psychological, sociological or historical - under which conspiracy theorists rest content with vague and general specifications of conspiracy's human face ('the Jew', or 'the Jews', or 'Judaeo-Masonry', or 'the hidden enemies of the state'), while energetically denouncing the action of this hidden hand in an expanding range of events or facets of modern life? What, on the

¹³ My remarks here are to some extent influenced by the discussion of the arguments and reasoning used in the show trials by Leites and Bernaut (1954).

¹⁴ Quoted in Navasky 1982: 7.

other hand, prompts them to want to break down the conspiracy into an ever-increasing series of individual faces?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to try to answer these questions. I have sought simply to show that they arise, and (in the second part of the paper as in the first) to suggest that conspiracy theories and the myths that inspire them must be discussed not, as they often are, as a rigid and rather simple system with simple implications, but as a complex and variable phenomenon, with complex and variable cultural significance.

G.T. CUBITT

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