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# From Evil Others to Evil Elites

## *A Dominant Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today*

*Véronique Campion-Vincent*

### CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The notion of a conspiracy implies a group that threatens the very existence of the society in which it is infiltrated. Americans have a long history of conspiracy scares as described in *The Paranoid Style of American Politics,* a classic 1960s work of scholarship (Hofstadter 1966). Conspiracy scares and the fears of un-American subversion were central to the definition of who or what was properly American. Attacks in the nineteenth century against Mormons, Catholics, and Jews corresponded to fears of "the gradual dilution of WASP identity." (Knight 2002:4) Successive fears, of slave revolts and of "the specter of the black rapist, and the formation of the Ku Klux Klan" (ibid.) legitimated "an emerging sense of national consciousness based on the ideology of white supremacy" (ibid.). These conspiracy narratives served to enhance communal identity against enemies—foreigners or deviants who no longer belonged in the national community because of their evil thoughts or acts.

Conspiracy theories today can also be considered a folk social science or folk history, as a "subculture of intellectual dissent" (Eliason 1996), aiming, as do academic treatises, to provide meaningful and accurate explanations of the world's condition. Conspiracy thinking is part of an everyday struggle to make sense of a rapidly changing world. This interpretative approach is well defined by the expression "contemporary mythologies" suggested by Ellis, who defines them as "scenarios made up of many beliefs and narratives which are accepted on faith and used then to link and give meaning to stressful events" (2000:5). These theories provide "a conspiratorial sense of being the victim of invisible and indefatigable forces [that] is an

everyday attitude in many countries" (Knight 2002:7) increasingly affected by globalization.

Conspiracies are deeply rooted in the social fabric, tied to power and secrecy. "The social contract is the deep-seated desire to be sure once and for all, to know what we are doing together and where we are going; human society is the impossibility to know and to be sure" (Poulat 1992:6).[1]

After the French Revolution, along with the expansion of democratic societies, conspiracy theories changed. The aim of political conspiracies was to destroy the social order and the nation, which had replaced the monarch as the holder of sovereignty. Stable truth and certainty was gone. The model of a scientifically conceived democratic society had not, however, kept its promises and "existing society is adrift, without transcendence, without universal positive values. With the Revolution, the era of uncertainty and indecision began" (ibid.:9).

Contemporary conspiracies remain possible and plausible, but are never proven. In their modern acceptance, conspiracies are characterized by their utopian aim as they attempt to create (or oppose) "a new society for a new man." (ibid.:9) In a society that includes groups with competing and exclusive aims, it is impossible to know fully one's adversaries, so "we are in the realm of the *irrefutable* and of the *inexhaustible*. The Great Conspiracy . . . can be secularized without losing its Manicheism" (ibid.:9).[2]

In the last decades "a popular paranoia" has emerged: a paranoia that questions—half-seriously, half-cynically—the version of events told by science or government authorities. "Conspiracy theory has become the lingua franca of a counter cultural opposition . . . from the committed to the casual" (Knight 2002:6–7).

## THE INTERNAL LOGIC OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In some ways, the surge of conspiracy theories seems paradoxical as it coincides with an increased complexity of society. When power was concentrated in a few hands, plots could be effective. Such is not the case today when "power flows, changes hands, and affects opinion, which no one controls and no one represents entirely" (Graumann 1987a:vii). Yet, the paradox is only apparent, as these conspiracy theories help to cope with the uncertainty accompanying this complexity. Looking for an explanation for a nonroutine important public event, people adopt conspiracy stories that present a set of cognitive attributes:

1. A specific agent(s) is named, with a clear motivation.
2. The agent is evil, the outcome is destructive, which is easy to understand—evil results in evil—and not a complicated and probably

more accurate explanation of complex events with unintended con-
sequences of multiple intersecting agents and actions.
3. The evil agent has the capacity for some big event—controls impor-
tant resources, acts united or with powerful allies, does it in secret,
and thus nobody stops it.
4. Conspiracies sometimes do happen, and everyone agrees that they
have at times.
5. Some learned, respected, prominent people, not just ignorant mar-
ginal people, promote the conspiracy theory—they may be self-
serving, but they cannot be ignored (Anthony Oberschall, personal
communication, October 19, 2003).

Our uncertain societies seem to be drifting from one crisis to the next,
and a society of information—which will logically focus on its own dys-
functional aspects—enhances this perception of a perpetual crisis. Revo-
lutionary leaders and international terrorists do exist and they use
conspiratorial intelligence and logistics to conceal their actions; but the
existence of conspirators with specific agendas does not fully explain
the adoption of all-encompassing conspiracy theories.

Social psychologists and historians (Graumann and Moscovici 1987)
have emphasized the psychological benefits of conspiracy theories in
reducing uncertainty. Conspiracy theories describe intentional agency as
the root of social movement and change. In a state of crisis in which the
established value system of a group or society seems at stake, it is easier to
cope with anxiety if it becomes fear of someone who can be held responsi-
ble. This enemy is camouflaged and masqueraded into a normal and inof-
fensive character. Those who have discovered the conspiracy must fight
"both the malice of the conspirator and the ignorance and disbelief of their
own group" (Graumann 1987b:247–48). Embracing conspiracy theories
often implies a commitment to a group of counter-conspirators: "The
image of a devilish plot has as [its] opposite that of the holy conspiracy"
(Girardet 1986:16). The enemy is organized, not an individual, but a dark
power.

French philosopher Alain de Benoist insisted on the seductiveness of
simplification in an increasingly complex universe. Conspiracy theories
reduce uncertainty in proclaiming a mechanical and linear causality, dis-
missing all reference to randomness or chance. Adopting conspiracy theo-
ries seems to furnish a universal password: why try to explain the
meaning of events through complex historical, psychological, or sociolog-
ical inquiries, when a direct cause can be supposed. "If things are going
badly, those responsible are not the social actors but 'occult forces'" (de
Benoist 1992:17). It is within us—in the universal tendencies of the human
mind—that the seductiveness of conspiracy theories resides. Such theories

"seem unaffected by the passage of time, cultural diversity, or the nature of the ideology upon which they are based" and cannot be opposed by proofs and argument. "Belief in conspiracy is not based on fact or reason, and is thus unaffected by them" (Graumann 1987a:ix).

Conspiracy theories were present throughout the nineteenth century in the interpretations of revolutionary movements by threatened political leaders and middle classes. Mass behavior was imagined as produced by evil leaders, who "became the 'negative' antagonists of the 'positive' and socially established respected leadership" (Graumann 1987b:246–47) and were conceived as conspirators, acting against the whole of society.

Conspiracy theories are strongly linked to the concept of nation. Often they targeted foreigners and other social deviants, demanding that they be expelled from the national "body." Conspiracy theories were effective in mobilizing the masses, turning them against outsiders. However, this tendency was only a first stage, and today's conspiracy theories are likely to target groups with political or social status rather than ethnic or religious groups, who are protected by the prevailing rules of politically correct speech. Social psychologist Serge Moscovici's approach, which focused on hostility toward minorities, especially alien minorities, is today no longer totally pertinent. Yet, Moscovici's text remains relevant in its vivid description of the anguish and resentment, still widespread, that push people to adopt conspiracy theories.

In his study, "The Conspiracy Mentality," Moscovici stressed that most accusations of conspiracy implied an alien minority and that "it is our century which has established conspiracy as a system of thought and a method of action." He added that the "compulsion to explain things by means of conspiracy" was a symptom, not of a delirium of persecution, but of "a delirium of accusation and inquisition. Through it the group or individual [the accusers] can prove their innocence and infallibility." Remarking that in such accusations "the possibility of antagonism within the group is rejected by displacing the conflict from the inside to the outside" (Moscovici 1987:153), he then discussed the roots of such hostile attitudes. Moscovici suggests,

> It is not necessary that a minority conspire. . . . The very existence of a minority already constitutes a conspiracy. It is agreed that to maintain and unite its members, society demands their consent to a certain number of beliefs and practices. Society imposes conformity. . . . This consent is based on the consensus of the majority. (ibid.:158)

Furthermore the consensus is reinforced by a prohibition on questioning core beliefs and practices from which the minority dissents. Thus, "Minorities represent a challenge, a walking, talking criticism of what

must be beyond all criticism" (ibid.:160) since they transgress our taboos through their differences. The minority allows itself to do things that the majority forbids to themselves and this ability appears to be a privilege. Transgression breeds resentment. Contempt for weak minorities is combined with a feeling of inferiority and powerlessness. Viewed from the outside, minorities are weak and at the mercy of the native dominant group; viewed from the inside they are dominant and perverse. For Moscovici, the hostility caused by feelings of inferiority and powerlessness is thus focused on convenient scapegoat minorities, instead of being directed at the dominant group in society.[3] However in the twenty-first century these minorities are no longer the only scapegoats, as hostility toward the dominant group is more frequently openly expressed.

Studying the early formation of "a persecuting society" in Western Europe, when the rise of centralized power was linked to the creation of feared deviants in the minds of the power-holders (such as kings, and particularly their auxiliaries and advisers, the literate clerks), historian R. I. Moore has shown how in pre-1250 Europe a single deviant category, accused of a total conspiracy, was created from heretics, lepers, and Jews. He writes:

> The images and nightmares are not always consistent, but they always feed the same fear. For all imaginative purposes heretics, Jews and lepers were interchangeable. They had the same qualities, from the same source, and they presented the same threat: through them the Devil was at work to subvert the Christian order and bring the world to chaos. (1987:64–65)

This categorization continued for centuries: witches replaced heretics, and later disappeared themselves, to be replaced by revolutionaries and subversives. Today drug addicts, serial killers, child abductors, and terrorists are the main characters in the cast of evil deviants said to operate among normal people.

Conspiracy theories try to explain a complex and seemingly random environment through the adoption of a simple model of causality, but they simultaneously reinforce the in-group's cohesion through the designation of enemies.

## Conspiracy Theories as Play

Whole sectors of literature and media now draw their substance from the prosperous industry of conspiracy theories. Personal involvement in conspiracy theories often takes the form of play, mixing humor and distance with paranoia and belief. It seems as if, renouncing the unattainable goal of a reduction of uncertainty and settling for a playful attitude that

will increase it, these people find satisfaction in emotional consumption, even if the emotions consumed are negative.

Those who share this attitude appreciate, for example, book titles such as *Rule by Secrecy: The Hidden History That Connects the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons and the Great Pyramids* (Marrs 2000),[4] the complex synopsis of *The Skeleton Key to the Gemstone Files* (Fenster 1999:117–20), or yet the Google Conspiracy list, from

> A Nation in Denial—http://www.angelfire.com/nj/jhgraf/anid.html. A personal account about American government conspiracies by a whistle-blower.

through

> Illuminati Conspiracy Archive—http://www.conspiracyarchive.com/ News and analysis. Covers UFO, UN, and New World Order conspiracies.[5]

to

> Weirdload—http://www.weirdload.com Essays from the edge, covering secrets and conspiracies from those involving the Roman Catholic Church to UFOs, space and metaphysics.

This hip attitude was initiated by the writings of Robert Anton Wilson, who in 1975 authored the parodic trilogy *Illuminatus!* Generally stocked in bookstores as science fiction and fantasy, this work has gained a cult status among many readers and has a large audience among computer enthusiasts. It is not only a book, but also was spun off into role-playing and board games. Wilson has added fictional "prequels," essays, and aphorisms. Readers and players of the Illuminati games:

> assume an ironic and almost mischievous distance from the "paranoid" situation of the characters and role with which they identify. In this conception and practice of conspiracy theory there is a delight in that which is constituted as the marginal, the sick, the apocalyptic. (Fenster 1999:216)

### A NEW TREND IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Rumors accusing elites of sinister plots are not new, but they are more prominent, and especially more pervasive and complex, today. French historians have noted the persistence and ubiquity of rumors accusing elites. François Ploux, author of a study of political rumors in France during the nineteenth century (Ploux 2003a) mentions several:

- The famine plot, reported from the eighteenth century, accused the authorities of creating a scarcity of grain. Such periods of scarcity were recurrent, and the famine plot appeared in each of them.
- The aristocratic plot, sometimes combined with the famine plot, asserted that aristocrats secretly planned large-scale murder of the simple people, or intended to reestablish the privileges suppressed by the French Revolution. It was equally recurrent (Ploux 2003b).
- Fear of the establishment of a "life-tax" that would entail fiscal inquisition into the most personal areas of private life. It was said that the treasury agents would tax linen, and count every piece of cloth in homes. Yves Bercé, a specialist of popular revolts in prerevolutionary France, counted more than twenty occurrences of this belief in the region of Aquitaine during the seventeenth century (Bercé 2003). This rumor reappeared in 1841, on the occasion of a census aiming at a better assessment of a tax on doors and windows (Caron 2003).
- Epidemics of plague in prerevolutionary France and of cholera in the nineteenth century regularly generated accusations of "voluntary spreaders of the illness, poisoners of fountains, greasers of door knobs, perverse doctors, nurses or grave diggers, killing vaccines" (Bercé 2003).

These hostile rumors generally caused riots. Some more positive rumors also circulated, revealing benevolent monarchism, opposing the king (essentially kind to the people) to his personnel (marked by greed and ferocity) and stating, for example, that a new tax would soon be removed because of the king's intervention.

More recently, conspiracy narratives have become all-encompassing, suggesting "the far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us" (Knight 2002:5). A pervading sense of being surrounded by uncontrollable forces is very widespread and the fear of being the object of "a complex conspiracy with vague but sinister intentions has become deeply ingrained in the popular imagination" (ibid.:7). American elites are said to participate in a conspiratorial plan for global domination uniting the Masons, the "Manhattan money powers,"[6] the Bilderbergers, the Trilateral Commission, the Davos World Economic Forum, and the United Nations to create a "New World Order[VCV1]" that will rob the American people of freedom that had been granted them by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Conspiracy fiction and denunciations of conspiracies tell stories of people whose actions are determined through mind control or implanted technology:

Alex Constantine claims that Sirhan Sirhan, like Lee Harvey Oswald, was a "hypno-patsy";[7] Timothy McVeigh apparently had an implant placed in his

buttocks by the army; and Cathy O'Brien tells of her "experience" as a CIA-controlled prostitute and drug courier in *Trance: Formation of America*.[8] In UFO stories the picture is the same. (Mason 2002:51)

These stories explain "a feeling of disempowerment within contemporary society;" they also allow the narrators not to feel responsible for their actions and "hypothesize the entry of the conspiracy into the subject" (ibid.:51).

The evolution of conspiracy narratives to denounce the powerful within society rather than to stigmatize outsiders, such as foreign powers or cultures, is clear when we consider recent examples such as the Kennedy saga, Marilyn Monroe's sad fate, the conspiracies linking the government to evil extraterrestrials, or Jack the Ripper's identity.[9]

Today's conspiracies also target organized crime, depicted as a confederation of Mafia families whose power extends far beyond the control of crime into the control of government and legitimate business (Best 1999). In describing the Mafia, the accent is less on its specific ethnic origins, than on its role as the real puppet-master. Already in 1960 Robert F. Kennedy authored *The Enemy Within*, reporting the activities of the Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field. Today, the conspiracy theorists' interpretations of the Iran-Contra scandal[10] assert control of government by the mafia: "Organized crime (actually a white-collar crime syndicate comprised of government bureaucrats, military officers, intelligence officers and con men) has in essence taken over the U.S. Government."[11]

Lyndon LaRouche, who was being interviewed on the radio on September 11, 2001, during the World Trade Center attacks, exclaimed right away, "This is a domestic covert operation."[12] By September 15, LaRouche was asserting that the enemy (evil elements of the "military-security establishment") was within:

The United States has been surprised by a mass-murderous attack from rogue forces deployed from within the U.S.A. itself. Since no foreign power has the ability to do to us what was done this past Tuesday, some rogue element operating within our military-security establishment is the only possible principal author of what has just occurred. . . . Anything we do to shift the blame to foreign forces . . . simply makes our nation more vulnerable to the rogue from within who has just done this, and is lurking ready to do more. ("Shoot the Neighbor's Cat," Lyndon LaRouche press release September 15, 2001)[13]

Thierry Meyssan's essay, published in March 2002, picked up the LaRouche thesis and asserted that "the United States war machine"[14] was the real cause of the 9/11 attacks. It met with a great and surprising suc-

cess.[15] In June 2002, Dasquié and Guisnel's essay presented and explained Meyssan's sources, but their perceptive analysis met less success.[16]

## OUR EVIL ELITES

The idea of the evil elite has links with three different but complementary universes of meaning: the call to action of social protest movements, the scary and funny realm of popular fiction, and the opinions of "the common people" on the subject of their reactions to disasters.

### Evil Elites in Social Protest Movements

In the literature linked to social protest movements denouncing globalization, the national or cultural frontiers seem to have disappeared, as a brotherhood of dissenters acts against elites—dominated by Western elites but with agents in all nations. These elites are consistently depicted as "enemies of the people," linked through malevolent conspiracies, and aiming to throw the powerless into the clutches of "the free market." The 2002 article by sociologist Denis Duclos in the antiglobalization monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* under the provocative title "Capitalism of Lies. Fraudulent Bosses and Mad Killers"[17] is a clever example of these claims.

Asserting that the two groups of bosses and killers are close, as mad killers[18] amplify into a caricature of "the frenetic appetite for riches" of the bosses, who are "the self-proclaimed world's masters," Duclos presents "the frantic partisans of globalization" as a sort of "world-sect." The financial class, whose power is essentially to rob others

> asserts its managerial power and challenges democracy. Playing on the immense growth of capital for fifteen years, it has already appropriated huge sections of the world-economy, and controls the rest through its capacity for destructive raids.

Financial power is "searching for ecstasy within ruin" and the "liberal daydream" is "delirious and suicidal." The dissenters must master the courage of assaulting

> these "globalized" offices where—from London to Hong Kong through New York—the plans are laid to systematically ruin the collective social and cultural structures that help the people of the world or sustain their alliances on bases of respect. (Duclos 2002)

The striking similarity of extremists from right and left has frequently been pointed out and is common knowledge. One finds the same target of

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"financial capitalism" in the discourse of extreme leftist "alterglobali-
zation" militant Duclos and of LaRouche's French disciple and friend
Jacques Cheminade:

> We have established the link between what is happening now in the United
> States and the international monetary and financial crisis. In a situation of
> system collapse, the "financial cancer" spreads its political, military and
> ideological metastases.[19]

In the last thirty years there has been a partial legitimization of con-
spiratorial thought. One generally finds in this literature a strong criticism
of Hofstadter's approach, which interpreted social phenomena through a
theory of individual pathology, posited the dominant society as normal,
and labeled those left outside by choice or force as pathological. It is
claimed that this approach served "as an excuse for neglecting, equating
and even repressing political protest of all sorts" (Fenster 1999:21).

The negation of randomness and chance that marks conspiracy theories
seems almost justified when the "contingency theory" that stresses the
role of chance and accident in many events is rejected as a social fantasy
negating the antagonisms that really split society: "Contingency theory
maintains the existing capitalist system by attributing any deviations from
the social equilibrium to chance and accident rather than immanent social
antagonisms or contradictions" (Willman 2002:28).

While these critics may seem extreme, it is certain that the sociopolitical
climate has dramatically changed since Hofstadter's days. In the 1970s,
following the Watergate scandal and investigation, the "pervasive atmos-
phere of mistrust and suspicion nurtured by startling realities" (Rosnow
and Fine 1976:58) made credible American conspiracy rumors whose plau-
sibility seems to have grown steadily since then.

### Evil Elites in Popular Fiction

In popular fiction the theme of evil elites' conspiracies is especially
widespread. Popular fiction has depicted mad scientists for over a hun-
dred years, and includes a thriving subgenre of the "medical thriller"
based on the portrayal of evil elites of doctors routinely killing patients
to maximize their gains. These popular fictions depict individuals, but
their characters are increasingly presented as servants or masters of vast
conspiracies.

In the United States, the 1960s and early 1970s were marked by assassi-
nations, of John and Robert Kennedy and of black political leaders,[20] but
also by the revelations of covert and overt intervention against subver-
sives at home and throughout the world and of cases of corporate malfea-

sance denounced by environmental movements. A widespread suspicion
of government and corporations developed, and was translated in a flour-
ishing of political conspiracy films such as *Executive Action* (1973), *The Con-
versation* (1974), *The Parallax View* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1974),
*The Domino Principle* (1975), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *Twilight's
Last Gleaming* (1979). These films suggested that the sources of evil were
the very U.S. institutions that had once been viewed positively (Kellner
2002:206–7). This emphasis continued into the late 1990s with such films
as *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *Mercury Rising* (1998), and *Enemy of the State*
(1998).[21]

Conspiracies of the powerful and of evil extraterrestrials link the
episodes of the American television series "The X-Files," whose "appeal
was confluence of two immensely attractive and primordial ideas: para-
normalism and conspiratorial thinking" (Goode 2002:48).

Mixing an irrational demonizing populist paranoia that "often projects
evil onto occult and supernatural figures" and a critical paranoia "that is
rationally suspicious of hegemonic institutions like the state, the military
or corporations" (Kellner 2002:205), "The X-Files" skillfully blended "sci-
ence fiction, horror, occult and fantasy genres" (ibid.:207) with conspiracy
genres. While "The X-Files" drew on 1950s science fiction movies and
1970s political conspiracy films, no previous television series had pre-
sented such a negative appraisal of the U.S. government. Contrasted with
the standard television series that "instilled an attitude of trust toward the
existing social system and fears of those threatening forces outside it"
(ibid.:218), "The X-Files" inspired distrust. It participated in a hip attitude
in which playing with conspiracy theories adds to uncertainty rather than
dispelling it.[22] Its episodes oscillated between depictions of classic occult
figures such as vampires, werewolves, and mutant monsters, often shown
as the consequences of human intervention, such as reckless experiments,
disturbance of nature's equilibrium, evil policies—governmental or cor-
porate—and depictions of extraterrestrials and government conspiracies.
"The X-Files" alternately privileged the occult and supernatural explana-
tions and debunked them as "either the machinations of human agencies
and individuals or a natural phenomenon that just appears supernatural"
(Kellner 2002:223).

## FOLK REACTIONS TO DISASTERS

Extremist views are ancient. What is new is the echo that stories of con-
spiracy theorists produce in the general public today. Denunciations of evil
elites and of their conspiracies are numerous at the level of folklore. For
example, in food contamination stories, the villains are often the greedy

corporations, which behave as enemies of the people in their unchecked quest for profit. They have replaced the foreigners, lepers, and Jews who used to be accused of poisoning water in the great epidemics of yesterday.

*A Food Contamination Case: The La Colza Disaster (Spain, 1981).*    The first example of assertions of elite groups' guilt involves rumors in the case of the colza oil poisoning known as the *la colza* disaster, which occurred in Spain in 1981. The case was very serious as one thousand died and twenty-five thousand were injured; in a trial that lasted two years (1987–1989), several oil traders were found guilty of having knowingly sold, for human consumption, cheap imported colza oil that had been adulterated to protect domestic olive oil and restrict colza oil use to industrial applications. An alternative version of these deaths and injuries suggested that the poisonings were caused by tomatoes grown in the Almeria region that had been accidentally poisoned with organophosphorous chemicals carelessly used by the large agricultural firms then developing in that region. The Spanish government, eager to protect agriculture and tourism, deliberately chose as culprits the weak oil traders, who sold mostly on street markets, rather than the powerful agriculture and chemical industry. This alternative version is dominant on the Web. In a Google search of the terms *sindrome toxico* and *colza* conducted on March 6, 2002, 267 Web pages from Spain were found, of which roughly two-thirds expressed the belief that the damage was caused by pesticides.

A network of ecological activists persuaded of the evils of pesticides publicizes the alternative version. In a long article published by the *Guardian*, investigative journalist Bob Woffinden (2001) passionately presented this alternative version, which allowed him to generalize the accusation of conspiracy to other alleged cases in which *governments* and *science* had been concealing epidemics of mystery illnesses [one in New Mexico in 1989, and one—also according to protester Mark Purdey[23]—striking British farmers (Woffinden 1994)] by blaming other substances (L-Tryptophan for New Mexico) to cover the real culprits, the infamous OP pesticides:

There have now been several issues about which there is a general perception that the truth is not being allowed to surface. These include, most obviously, the effects of OPs on farmers in Britain. . . . All official inquiries somehow fail to establish a link between pesticide exposure and the illness. The WHO [World Health Organization], to its shame, continues to refer to the Spanish epidemic as the "toxic oil syndrome". . . . The world-wide deception continues, automatically recycled by a compliant media. . . . Suppressing the truth must be remarkably straightforward. All it takes is a series of epidemiological reports, accredited by scientists of a similar persuasion and then published in reputable scientific journals. There are, as Disraeli might have said, lies, damned lies and peer-reviewed scientific papers. (Woffinden 2001)[24]

Such "crusaders" distort the facts. There *is* official preoccupation with the safety of OP pesticides[25] and the norms of evaluation *are* reviewed in the light of cases that are not suppressed but evaluated and analyzed. However, the technical language of the numerous Environmental Protection Agency documents available on the Web concerning OP pesticides is less accessible or exciting than the discovery of a universal and all-encompassing conspiracy.

*A Natural Disaster: The "Somme Flood Rumor" (France, 2001).*[26]  The next example is the "Somme Flood Rumor" as it was named by the media. The rumor circulated among the inhabitants of Picardy, victims of an exceptional flood of the river Somme that lasted from February 5 to May 24, 2001.[27] This story explained the exceptional floods as the result of a government (or elite) conspiracy:

> What has been called the rumor of Abbeville[28] tells of the sacrifice of a district to the ambition and greed of the political class as, in its first narrative form "someone" would have deviated the water of the Seine toward the river Somme so as to protect the capital which was going to welcome the Selection Committee of the Olympic Games.[29] (Vialle 2002:28)

Other variants state that Abbeville was flooded to compel the inhabitants to leave their houses so as to build a freeway without indemnity, or that the flood had been organized "to demolish our houses and to set in place bungalows and cottages for these Paris gentlemen and their acquaintances."[30] More affluent disaster victims judged that the flood was the result of an "erroneous maneuver on the part of the technicians of the waterways" (ibid.:29).

This story's appearance was not spontaneous. Specific accusers, of which the most influential, pensioner André Boulogne, had created a Defense Association after the previous 1994 flood, promoted it. On April 11, Boulogne organized a demonstration under the banner "The Somme River, Gutter of Paris." The accusation was reinforced by the inquiry of another pensioner, Christian Leleu, who filmed the water flowing into the Somme from the Northern Canal.

The story was enthusiastically picked up by the mayor of Abbeville, Joel Hart. He interrupted a meeting between local authorities, technicians, and the prefect with the remark, "We came here to get money and to know: when will you decide to close the taps?" (Davy 2001). Hart faced elections in March 2001, and was reelected with 60 percent of the vote. The media made great use of *la rumeur* to present a simplified version that they could ridicule and dismiss.

The disaster victims, who developed the rumor into a political belief, reacted by protesting. The region's economical backwardness and history

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of hardships during previous wars affected the inhabitants. They felt that
they had been "sacrificed" in the First World War—which entailed a com-
plete destruction of Picardy to protect Paris from an invasion. These mem-
ories were mobilized and revived through the "conspiracy" explanation of
the floods as a means of saving Parisian elites. As one observer noted,
"Our interviews have shown that the memory of war was an outline that
helped to 'think' the floods and had sustained belief in the rumor. . . . The
floods functioned as a social scheme reactivating the war's memories"
(Vialle 2002:52, 63).

     The disaster victims interviewed by Vialle strongly rejected the label
"rumor" and emphasized that it was through enquiry and reason, not
hearsay, that they now knew the real truth, the cause of the floods:

> It's several facts that coincided and the fact that we went to see the overflows
> because we went up the whole canal [ . . . ]. It was not at all a rumor. It's been
> called like that, but for us it was a concrete fact, it was truth. It was made into
> a rumor because one didn't want it to be the truth but for us, who were
> Abbevillians, the mayor himself had launched an enquiry with process
> server affidavit [ . . . ] we had been there. We went to check [ . . . ]. We saw
> that there were overflows wide open when we were told it didn't exist.
> When you are told it does not exist and that you see it with your own eyes.

     When the interviewer reminds the accusing victim that official inquiries
have contradicted her version (that voluntary overflow into the river
Somme had been arranged using the Northern Canal that links the
river Seine to the Northern Somme), she expresses strong distrust toward
this official truth:

> The problem is that they have been told not to talk. He told me (because I met
> one of the investigators) that the "reason of State" (Raison d'Etat = National
> Security) was stronger than simple reason. . . . The official version is all that
> counts. (Vialle 2002:second interview of DP, female worker, 50)[31]

     "The official version" was that underground water reserves, filled by
the pervasive rains of former years, overflowed naturally and were unable
to absorb the exceptional precipitation of 2001.

     The couple interviewed by Vialle expresses a generalized conspiracy
hypothesis, denouncing recurrent floods caused by the action of Paris
authorities:

> JLB: For us the State did nothing. They rather are the ones who flooded
> us. . . . Anyhow, they will do it again each time Paris has water.
>
> FLB: Look at all these floods now. There have been floods in Brittany and in
> the East, there are floods everywhere. . . . Each time they have a little water,

they send it in small places, it's easier that way. It's all a question of dough. . . . Not Parisians themselves. . . . It's the chiefs, the government. It's them who decide, no? (Vialle 2002 interview of JLB and his wife FLB, both workers, 43 and 45)

The adoption of this alternative version by many of the flood victims is an indicator of the growth in the French public of an attitude of distrust toward political authorities.[32] However, the Somme folks remain matter-of-fact and their accusations are closer to the classic rumors of the earlier centuries, as the plots denounced are limited and with fairly clear objectives. The generalized accusations of conspiracies are more present in the denunciations of the ecological activists, who assert that the alliance between political authorities and greedy powerful pesticides producers was the real cause of the *la colza* food contamination and of other mysterious epidemics.

## CONCLUSION

While accusers spreading contemporary conspiracy theories, who are boosted by a general loosening of repression in Western societies, coupled with the rise of the Internet, are today more visible, their numbers may not have increased from a century ago. In fact, the recent targeting of our own evil elites does not rule out the old evil "others"—aliens or minorities.[33]

For the social sciences, these accusers matter less than the other segments of the public, the disaster victims of the Somme floods, for example, who pick up these theories. What is most meaningful is that the theme of the evil elites as incarnation of the enemy within has spilled from the specialized conspiracy theories circles into the general public.

Already salient in the 1970s, the developments of mass communication that have created a "universal awareness of world events . . . a global village of gossip" (Rosnow and Fine 1976:95) are one of the main explanatory factors of this adoption. It is evident that the volume of information has grown considerably with the development of the fax and the Internet, causing an outpouring of information that paradoxically may lead to an increased suspicion of legitimate sources of information (Gladwell 2002:99, 271–75).

It seems that, at the grass-roots level, people of the rich countries have abandoned faith in continuous progress and adopted the poor countries' attitude of distrust toward government and society.

While the distrust is likely to remain for the foreseeable future, it is hazardous to predict that the general public will continue to endorse conspiracy theories. The author's analysis of organ theft narratives (Campion-Vincent 1997, 2001) has revealed that—even as social conditions connected

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to the narratives have remained constant—the scary tales disappear, become less topical, and are restricted to limited circles. The same process has been observed in the case of satanic abuse, where the accusations now operate in small subcultures and no longer raise concern in society at large (La Fontaine 1997). Rumors are dynamic and can be considered as "short-term enthusiasms" (Best, Chapter 10 in this volume). Thus, the existence of conspiratorial beliefs need not suggest that such fantastic claims will always be with us, certainly not in the form in which we know them today.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## NOTES

1.  Author's translation, as for the other quotations not originally in English.

2.  Dualism, after the Manichean religious system (third to fifth century) representing Satan in a state of everlasting conflict with God. The term is common, and unflattering, among French contemporary political commentators.

3.  Discussing the origins of Christian crusades against Jewish communities, similar concepts were developed by historian Norman Cohn (1967), who talks of "subversion myths," and folklorist Alan Dundes (1991), who calls this psychological process "projective inversion" (Ellis 2000:121–25).

4.  Jim Marrs authored *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy* (1989) one of the source's of Oliver Stone's 1991 movie *JFK*.

5.  Ellis has convincingly shown how the Illuminati scare, based on the denunciation of the authentic subversive Order of the Illuminati created in 1770 in Bavaria by Adam Weishaupt and suppressed in 1785, has influenced conspiracy circles and evolved from the targeting of outsiders (Jews and Masons presented as worshippers of Satan) to that of elites (bankers and liberals). (Ellis 2000:120–42; Bill Ellis, personal communication, January 15).

6.  The phrase is used by Pat Buchanan (Knight 2002:5).

7.  Constantine (1995:11); see also Keith (1997:151–54). Sirhan Sirhan murdered Robert F. Kennedy.

8.  O'Brien and Phillips (1995).

9.  In the last twenty years, the steady flow of books and films on the subject has consistently presented various elite characters as the real Jack the Ripper, for example, the Duke of Clarence and the painter Sickert, asserting that they were generally protected by a tightly knitted establishment.

10.  The sale of guns to Iran was covertly organized by the U.S. government during Reagan's presidency, to get resources to support the Nicaraguan *contras*

without House or Senate approval. The operation was orchestrated by Oliver North.

11. Uri Dowbenko on http://www.conspiracydigest.com 2001, review of *The Conspirators: Secrets of an Iran-Contra Insider*.

12. Interview conducted with Jack Stockwell on K-TALK radio in Salt Lake City, Utah. Available at http://www.larouchepub.com/pr_lar/2001/010911stockwell.html.

13. Available at http://www.larouchepub.com/pr_lar/2001/010915_shoot_cat.html.

14. Expression used in the online page of the book's English version, available on http://www.carnot.fr

15. It sold 164,100 copies and was third in sales of French essays for 2002 (Salles 2003:x). Meyssan's French publisher http://www.carnot.fr announced in March 2003 that the book was available in fifty countries and had been translated into twenty-five languages.

16. Twenty thousand copies sold, translation into Arabic and Italian (information supplied by Marion Staub, information officer of the publisher, February 26, 2003).

17. Duclos, who has a good knowledge of popular culture, is the author of *The Werewolf Complex. America's Fascination with Violence* ([1994] 1998).

18. Duclos's examples refer to mass killers shooting indiscriminately into crowds before their suicide.

19. http://solidariteetprogres.online.fr/Jacques/Livrecomplot.html text date June 19, 2002.

20. "Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and leaders of the Black Panther Party" Kellner 2002: 206.

21. This revived the hero of *The Conversation* (1974).

22. "The 'X-Files' made us question whether we really understand the world, since there are all these unknown malevolent things lurking underneath the surface."(Chip Heath personal communication October 21, 2003)

23. Mark Purdey's website, subtitled "Seeking the Truth through Science," is at http://www.markpurdey.com/

24. These accusations are echoed on the web site http://www.getipm.com/sitemap.htm .

25. For example, 24,100 answers to a Google search (conducted October 13, 2003) on: OP Pesticides Safety.

26. The author thanks Aurélie Vialle, for the loan of her 2002 DEA thesis in political sociology on the Somme Rumor (Vialle 2002).

27. The claim of rumor, raised by the media very early, is somewhat overstretched and corresponds to a contemporary tendency to qualify as "rumor" all explanations with which one does not agree. The two students who researched this case talk, respectively, of "media creation" (Davy 2001) and of "political belief" (Vialle 2002). The author's preferred phrase is "successful alternative version."

28. Abbeville, the flooded city of the Somme Département (the district named after the Somme river) was the hotbed of these stories.

29. Paris was a candidate for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games.

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30. Quotation of Jasmine, retired seamstress, seventy-five years old (Vialle 2002:29).

31.  Source for both quotations.

32.  "A systematic and radical negation of politics characterizes French youth today, which expresses an anti-political discourse, not only a-political or expressing disinterest. The universe of politics is the utmost of abjection said to mark the adult world" (Aldrin 2001:551–52).

33.  For example, conspiracy theorists today often present "the hand of Israel" as the ultimate "real cause" of the September 11 attacks.


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