

# Marc Angenot

## The conspiratorial mind

### A dialectical and rhetorical history?

A dialectical and rhetorical history remains to be conceived, or at least developed. I am going to limit myself first to outline the problematic as I see it. This history would be the study of the historical and sociological variation - the historicity and sociality - of types of argumentation, means of proof, methods of persuasion. This history of the reasonable and the persuadable is hardly sketched out; nevertheless, there are bits and pieces here and there, but no synthesis.

In this context, I am giving the word "reasonable" a relative, particularist meaning: the term is related to the set of schemata that have been accepted somewhere and at a given time, or that are accepted in such and such a place, within such and such an ideological sodality <sup>1</sup>, as sagacious and convincing, while at the same time they are seen as "aberrant" in other sectors or at other times.

All sorts of vague and uncertain words, not at all confronted with each other, untheorized, seek to designate a certain *Pregnanz*, certain singularities in the manners of reasoning and arguing that in every state of society form an arsenal of available "approaches" or, to borrow Descartes's well-known subtitle, idiosyncratic ways of "rightly conducting one's reason and of seeking truth." Analysts have spoken of a "spirit" [esprit] (Augustin Cochin described, for example, the "spirit of Jacobinism"<sup>2</sup>); of "mechanisms" [mécanismes] (Manichaeism might be characterized as a "mental mechanism" judged to belong to certain "ideological families" [familles d'esprit], unpleasant and suspect to others); of, quite simply, "rhetoric," thought this is hardly more clear (the Harvard philosopher and historian Albert O. Hirschman has studied *The Rhetoric of Reaction* and reconstructed its Ideal-type, invariable over the course of two centuries<sup>3</sup>); of "mind" or "thought" [pensée] (researchers have frequently

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<sup>1</sup> I am making use of Maxime Rodinson's terminology, found in *De Pythagore à Lénine. Des activistes idéologiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> The famous counter-revolutionary historian Augustin Cochin took for the object of his studies the pre-1789 "societies of thought." In his work, he describes the blooming of a totally new way of thinking and persuading - which he simply calls "philosophical," or by anticipation, "Jacobin" - which to him appears singular, fundamentally false, deleterious and logically the bearer of future crimes, "abstractly" deduced and justified by the Robespierres and other doctrinaires of the Terror. Augustin Cochin, *L'esprit du jacobinisme. Préface de Jean Baechler* (Paris: PUF, 1979, partial reprinting of the 1922 edition), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991).

discussed "utopian thought," supposedly cognitively opposed to positivist monism<sup>4</sup>); of "systems" labeled with *-ism* as cognitive frameworks underlying specific doctrines (the eminent liberal thinker Karl R. Popper claimed to demonstrate that *historicism* - the mind that rationalizes social evolution in terms of historical determinism and the "meaning" or "direction" [sens] of history - delimited on the left a membership community while exceeding the knowable and unreasoning over chimerical ideas<sup>5</sup>); of "styles of mind," finally: American political scientists make of what they call "the paranoid style" (which is not without a tight relationship to the "conspiratorial mind" that I will be discussing) "a mode of social thought" proper to certain "radical" sectors of U.S. politics.<sup>6</sup>

The enumeration of diverse terms in the preceding paragraph serves to designate what to me appears to be a *vast, largely uncultivated problem*. What are we trying to discuss with such intuitive and vague categories, that nevertheless seem all to point toward a determined problematic? Can we periodize these categories, confront them as an historian of ideas, rigorously situate them in the "topography" of cultures and social milieux? Can we explain each case's genesis and dynamic? Should we not inscribe this already vast set of problems within an even larger question: How have history and modern society been *deciphered*, anticipated, rationalized, understood? Ultimately, can we catalogue the various manners there have been in the two centuries of

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<sup>4</sup> In several of my works, I have studied this sort of "thought" [pensée] (*L'Utopie collectiviste. Le Grand récit socialiste sous la Deuxième Internationale* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993]; *D'où venons-nous? Où allons-nous? La décomposition de l'idée de progrès* [Montréal: Trait d'union, coll. «Spirale», 2001], etc.). We can catalogue, across the two centuries of modernity, the appearances of a certain constant manner of arguing society as that which "is not working," which "can't keep going like this": an argumentation that leads to the promise of an imminent New World, which I designate as a *logic* of modernity. This logic has evolved in an insurmountable conflict with the other axiomatic systems of discursive thought - which, however, surreptitious contaminations. "Utopian" thought - what does that mean? Not at all an imaginative fiction, as we sometimes hear, but the end-point of a reasoning, the *pars construens* (as rhetoricians say) of a new thing, born at the end of the 18th century: radical social critique, which claims to *to the root* of evil.

<sup>5</sup> *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> George Marcus, *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1. This word *paranoid* has been integrated into the political-science lexicon since Richard Hofstadter's classic *Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965). In his famous book, the thinker describes what he names a rather widespread "style of mind" marked by "exaggerated" reasonings, by a spirit of suspicion, by conspiratorial fantasies. The publication of Hofstadter's book was contemporaneous to the Kennedy assassination, which would give rise to a great number of particularly persistent paranoid theories. The paranoid style, in his eyes, had a long national history - from U.S. anti-Catholicism in the 19th century to anti-communism (Joseph McCarthy had just been isolated). The Zionist plot had been working well on the Internet, in tandem with the more recent theme of the great Islamist Plot, when the events of 11 September 2001 brought to light a *real* evil-doing conspiracy that had as its aim the destruction of the United States and its democracy: which is to say that paranoid reasoning received a confirmatory boost, thereby guaranteeing a bright future ahead.

modernity of positioning oneself and living (in/through) [(sur)vivre] history by seeking to *give meaning* to the course of things?

Without a doubt we can suppose the universality of human reason, a general axiom that hardly engages us in any concrete way, and ask the kinds of questions that bear, not on human thought in its universal abstraction, but in its social/historical context. We will not speak of different *essences*, but of marked choices and sectorial preferences.

In this essay, I will limit myself to following up this sketch of a problematic with a no less rapid and summary case study. My object of study will be something discussed by many researchers before me: *the conspiratorial mind*. The historian of European anti-Semitism Léon Poliakov had before me given the name "diabolical causality" to the historic form of explanation according to which society is undermined by occult forces foreign to it, by an evil-doing coalition that acts in the shadows and sets in motion a nefarious plan of world conquest that is not far from succeeding and that would explain all of the evils we suffer from, the causes of which up to this point we were ignorant of, a form of explanation that places responsibility for all evils on the Others, purifying *our* world of any guilt and any blame.<sup>7</sup> This logic is not unrelated to the age-old logic of the scapegoat, as revealed by René Girard.<sup>8</sup>

### **The conspiratorial mind and its history**

Conspiracy is not a "theme" in culture, nor an idea, nor a specific "ideology, but precisely that which I have chosen to call a *logic*, a cognitive and hermeneutic dispositive, a manner - exclusive of others - of deciphering the world that has above all a history that can be followed in Western modernity.<sup>9</sup>

In their most odious forms, conspiratorial explanations flourish, as no-one is unaware, among today's revisionists. Arthur Butz in *The Hoax of the 20th Century* and Richard Harwood in *Did Six Millions Really Die?*, who "demonstrate" that the Holocaust never happened, for good measure offer a conspiratorial explanation: the Holocaust is a lie hatched by Zionists in order to establish the omnipotence of Israel, to realize their eternal plan of world domination and to

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<sup>7</sup> Léon Poliakov, *La causalité diabolique, essai sur l'origine des persécutions* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Girard has shown the extent of scapegoat reasonings, starting with the Black Plague and the massacres of Jews around 1349-1350 and bringing it to our banal modern everyday life.

<sup>9</sup> See my *Dialogues de sourds. Traité de rhétorique antilogique* (Paris: Mille et une Nuits, 2008).

pervert the spirits of the Gentiles.<sup>10</sup> This conspiratorial logic, which until the 1970s, was more or less the prerogative of the far right, is today blooming on the anti-globalization left. In this context, the historian of ideas' job is, it seems to me, to shed light on this kind of resurgent phenomenon by retracing its history and highlighting its "logic."

Now the said logic goes back to a particular text which, "as if by accident" (to speak the way this logic thinks), dates to the very origins of modernity's great ideological clashes: the large, highly "counter-revolutionary" book by the Abbé Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, published in 1798.<sup>11</sup> In his "Preliminary Discourse," the Abbé presents the misfortunes of the age and his explanation:

At an early period of the French Revolution, there appeared a Sect calling itself JACOBIN, and teaching \_that all men were equal and free!\_ [...] Whence originated these men, who seem to arise from the bowels of the earth, who start into existence with their plans and their projects, their tenets and their thunders, their insidious means and ferocious resolves?" (I: i, ii)

Having demonstrated that the Revolution had been plotted from end to end by Illuminist secret societies, he concludes: "its crimes have been its filial duty; and those black deeds and atrocious acts the natural consequences of the principles and systems that gave it birth" (viii). The future looked even more sombre: the French Revolution "was only a sportive assay of [the Jacobins'] strength" (xvi). The demoniacal absurdity of revolutionary principles was reflected in the atrocity of the means put into work. No "perverse consequence" in Barruel's mind, the Revolution that had occurred following a criminal plan prepared well in advance was perfectly consistent with itself and the Abbé *proves or confirms* the monstrosity of its ideas by its atrocities.

Eighty years later, we find all of the traits of this manner of reasoning in an emerging ideology, peculiar to the Catholic world under the anti-clerical Third Republic. The ideology of the "crusade" against the Freemasons. The denunciation of the Lodges centres on the myth of the all-powerful and flagitious plot. Freemasonry forms, an expert in the question - Mgr. Fava - reveals to his flocks, "a society as vast as the Universe whose infinitely numerous members occupy all ranks of society, [...] an association whose head is hidden like the serpent's while its long rings unravel in the distance, before all eyes; [...] by the consciousness of the evil that it does and that it seeks to do away and

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<sup>10</sup>M. Billig, *Ideology & Opinions, Studies in Rhetorical Psychology* (Newbury Park CA: Sage, 1991), p. 109.

<sup>11</sup>Hambourg: Fauche, 1798-99. 5 vol. Eng. by???

forever, this association is visibly marked by the sign of hatred." <sup>12</sup> This is a *total explanation* and the conspiracy hatched by a sect surrounded by shadows (or, rather, by an invisible conductor) is this explanation - validated by Leo XIII in an encyclical: "Its actions alone can explain the pace of the Revolution and contemporary events."<sup>13</sup> "Is it an illusion to see the Lodges acting in every detail of our revolutions and political upheavals?" Certainly not! As masters, they reign over France.<sup>14</sup> But it's not only France. The Vatican, in 1896, calls the Congress of Trent, which abundantly and positively responds to the key-question: "Is there an international organization of Freemasons under a supreme leader whose power has an influence on all political action all over the globe?"<sup>15</sup> The progress of socialism in Europe is the proof. Anti-Masonic ideology thus forms a *historiosophy*, an "explanation" of history in progress that respond point by point to progressive or socialist *historiosophies*. The Masons descend from the very group of criminals that prepared and perpetrated the French Revolution and who, since 1789, have obstinately pursued their task of perdition.

Freemasonry acts across the entire century; it has overthrown thrones, it wants to topple altars, eradicate the faith. It seeks the complete annihilation of Catholicism; it has been since the beginning and remains "a conspiracy [...] to demolish morals," "a plot conceived in advance to pervert and corrupt the peoples [...] with its pornographic imagery, its creation of dens of iniquity, its multiplication of flows of alcohol."<sup>16</sup> As for the progress of socialism, the Masonic conspiracy explains it just as clearly: "The International is merely a branched - detached or not - of the Freemasonry that itself has been organized by the Jewry to overwhelm Christian nations."<sup>17</sup> In sum, all crimes can be attributed to Freemasonry - thus the thickness of the books dedicated to cataloguing them.

The crimes that the Lodges have committed for some time to kill France, to destroy the Catholic Church and the Army are so numerous that we would need

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<sup>22</sup> *La Franc-Maçonnerie démasquée*, 1 : vol. 1884, 3. See also Mgr. Amand-Joseph Fava, *Le secret de la franc-maçonnerie* (Lille: Desclée de Brouwer, 1885).

<sup>33</sup> Étienne Cartier, *Lumière et Ténèbres*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Les maçons juifs et l'avenir, ou la tolérance moderne*. Louvain: Fonteyn, 1884, 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Actes du 1er congrès antimaçonnique international, 26-30 September 1896, Rome*. Tournai: Desclée, 1897-1899. 2 vol in 4°.

<sup>66</sup> *La Franc-Maçonnerie démasquée*, II, 108.

<sup>77</sup> J.-F. Debauge, *La vermine : francs-maçons, révolutionnaires, libres-penseurs, juifs, politiciens* (Paris: s.e., 1890), p. 9.

to write several volumes if we wanted to give even a glimpse.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Jewish conspiracy**

In this context and around this time, one will remark that certain anti-Masonic accusations became identical point by point with the anti-Jewish accusations developing in a contiguous ideological sector. It is all there: the deleterious, ubiquitous action, the secret, criminal texts, the ambitions of universal domination, even the "ritual crimes" perpetrated within the "back lodges" for great initiates. Almost all of the predicates applied to the Jews are applied to the Grand Orient. An anonymous writer, signing under the name Kimon, in their *Politique israélite* shows that the Jews were behind the "alcoholic poisoning of the population."<sup>19</sup> *La Franc-maçonnerie démasquée*, a monthly Catholic journal, shows with a profusion of evidence that alcoholism results from a "Masonic plot" that is working to demoralize the masses.<sup>20</sup> All that was needed was a push in the right direction for these two hermeneutics, common to the same milieu, to become merged.

If secret societies explained the misfortunes of the age, what explains the secret societies? Mgr Léon Meurin was the first to find the answer after long numerological and cabbalistic deductions:

Having hoarded the treasures and civil powers of this world, the Jew now leads an unremitting war against the Church of Jesus Christ and all those who refuse to bend their knee before him and his Golden Calf.<sup>21</sup>

Good God, it was certain then. If the Jews were the hidden leaders of the lodges, the great explanation became more and more limpid and ore satisfying for certain obsessed minds. Now, many Catholic publicists in the 1880s and 1890s tried desperately to demonstrate that "the Jews are almost all Freemasons"<sup>22</sup> - or better, "the Jewery [is] the master of the Lodge"<sup>23</sup>. To the innocent and the naive, they revealed that the Jews were the "absolute leaders, though more or

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<sup>18</sup> Baron, *Les Sociétés secrètes*, 354.

<sup>19</sup>D. Kimon [pseudonym], *La politique israélite: politiciens, journalistes, banquiers; le judaïsme et la France: étude psychologique* (Paris: Savine, 1889).

<sup>20</sup> 1889, vol. II, pp. 108-113.

<sup>21</sup> Monsignor Léon Meurin, *La franc-maçonnerie, synagogue de Satan* (Paris: Retaux, 1893), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Tirailleur*, periodical, 12.1.1889, 3.

less hidden" of Masonry;<sup>24</sup> "the sort of Church of which Satan is the invisible head was built with Masonic stone, by the hatred the Jews bear against Christ."<sup>25</sup> "The Freemasonic Jews attack Christ with a rage that cannot be contained..."<sup>26</sup> The Jew is the head, the Freemason (the Grand Orient including the gullible as well, people unaware of the antipatriotic role they are being made to play) is only the arm! Édouard Drumont, whose erudition people thought much of, confirms this fact: "Freemasonry is an institution of Jewish origin. I would add that it has remained Jewish and is today more Jewified than ever."<sup>27</sup> If Leo XIII condemned Masonry in *Humanum Genus* and if we can show that Mason and Jew, Jew and Mason, they are one and the same, then anti-Semitism is approved of and recommended by the Holy Father.

Thus the heart of anti-Semitic argumentation - for anti-Semitism is first of all a matter of special argumentation - is the thesis of omnipresent malfeasance, the index of a general conspiracy - and this, more than twenty years before the Tsarist Okhrana plagiarized and compiled the famous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>28</sup> Antisemitism, all of its analysts from Léon Poliakov to Zeev Sternhell and Pierre-André Taguieff have shown, is not *simply* an ideology (not simply *contents*, a vision of society, a doctrine of hate, watchwords and slogans); it is a special manner of directing one's thought and persuading (oneself). Anxiogenic, "paranoid," conspiratorial then, this manner of thinking has not been the peculiarity of just anti-Semites: it is also similar in its general schema to other "siege-mentality" ideologies, like the fear and hatred of Jesuits, that was situated rather "on the left" under the July Monarchy, or the anti-Masonic crusade of which I have just made an account.

### **The ways in which the conspiratorial mind is "rational"**

From the very beginning, conspiratorial reasoning is set off by something logical

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Pontigny, *L'Alliance anti-juive*, vol. I, 1889, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Abbé de Lamarque, preface to *Le Juif talmudiste*, Bruxelles: Vromant, s.d.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Gandoux. *La république de la franc-maçonnerie, ou la franc-saloperie devant la Raie-publique [sic]* (Bordeaux, 1885), 57.

<sup>6</sup> *La Franc-maçonnerie démasquée*, vol. 1885, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Édouard Drumont, *Nos maîtres. La tyrannie maçonnique* (Paris: Librairie antisémite, 1899), 13.

<sup>8</sup> P. A. Taguieff, *Les Protocoles des Sages de Sion* (Paris: Berg International, 1992). 2 vol. ⇨ Revised and corrected edition: *Les Protocoles des Sages de Sion. Faux et usages d'un faux* (Paris: Berg / Fayard, 2004). 1 vol.

in the banal sense of this word: a series of unpleasant events having been identified, let us find the causes or - and this would be better, simpler, clearer - the Cause. To do so, let us push aside the "smoke screens." The discovered plot allows one to "bring into the realm of the rational"<sup>29</sup> and the explicable precisely that which at first appears desolating and inexplicable: in this way, the plot - this cannot be denied - is the product of an effort of rationalization; it has a "cognitive function"<sup>30</sup>, though a wayward one. Its terrifying character results from the fact that this rational effort leads to a legitimated hatred. Leading to hate, it runs on resentment: the lack of self-esteem, the feeling of having been wronged, demeaned, oppressed, typical of the person of resentment, are compensated by the *intellectual* pleasure of discovering the mechanism of theft and its secret cause, as well as the *moral* pleasure of knowing to whom you should direct your hatred - who sees his troubles, sees his hatred! Discovering the "truth" at the end of a long "investigation" amounts to - eyes now wide open - to seeing one's troubles, to seeing everything under a new and *simplified* light: before I suffered from the recognition of various evils, before I felt oppressed without knowing why or by whom; now I have discovered that there was a final cause to my misfortune and to those of the age: "Everything was foreseen, meditated, worked out, resolved, decided in advance," wrote the Abbé Barruel.<sup>31</sup>

The banal appearances, the tiny, partial explanations - these were but a smokescreen. The Fiend's plan of world conquest is the long-hidden truth of the disastrous course of things. A feeling of profound lucidity inhabits the adherents of conspiratorial ideologies, exasperated by the resistances of the incredulous who obstinately doubt their limpid and astonishing thesis, corroborated by an immense accumulation of facts and pieces of evidence. Specialists in these kinds of questions engage in arduous research; they unearth revealing documents, obscure witnesses, and their efforts are rewarded by great certitudes, the feeling of having progress, of having come to a revelation: These leaders, this areopagus mysteriously assembled around a single leader, the great patriarch of Universal Masonry: where are they? where do they assemble? and what are they? That this sanhedrin, that this senate exists, no-one has any doubt..."<sup>32</sup> The "appearances" hide a "truth" that was simultaneously astonishing, mysterious and convoluted: a plan for world conquest (for it is always with this goal, lent to the Enemy, that such writers end) is the hidden truth of the disastrous course that society has taken.

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<sup>9</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, *La foire aux illuminés. Ésotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005), 29.

<sup>0</sup> Taguieff, *Foire*, 80.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., I x.

<sup>2</sup> *La franc-maçonnerie démasquée*, 1884, 302.

Conspiratorial theories of history are *abductions* (in Peirce's sense); they do not claim a priori plausibility, but an encompassing efficiency. By showing that a whole series of events without apparent link between them, but all more or less distressing, has a single, hidden cause, we are not necessarily choosing the most plausible explanation. The anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic actors of the past all underlined that at the beginning of their "reflection," the secret and evil-doing conspiracy that they heard talk of appeared to them unimaginable, implausible, but the theory's *factual efficiency* ended up convincing them; it is sufficient to deduce from the abduction a Final Solution to (re)find happiness. There is certainly something affective that accompanies this logic - everything that displeases the reasoner (such things are quite varied: the progress of socialism, financial skullduggery and crises, bankruptcies, the emancipation of women, yellow journalism [la presse boulevardière], modernist literature) has a single cause: the Jews, for example. This constantly reinforced consistency confirms the accuracy of my axiological intuition, if I might say so. Next to the verisimilitude of abduction, a common criterion of probable validity, and compensating it if it is deficient, there is the illuminating force of the synthesis obtained.

### **The ways in which it is seen as "illogical" by others**

The principle of non-contradiction is foreign to the conspiratorial mind: the villainous company that is preparing to govern the world and plotting the destruction of the Righteous has more than iron in the fire. The Judeo-Masonic sect controls at once the large banks and the parties of disorder, the "two Internationals" of the rich and the poor. "Ultimately, the two Internationals are confounded: they obey the same hidden leaders; they execute the same mysterious instructions," reveals the captain de Boisandré, one of the experts on the question during the Belle Époque.<sup>33</sup> This idea was easily explained since Karl Marx already received his orders from the "international banking Jewry." One will note that unsurprisingly among anti-Semites, what some attribute to the diabolical directions of the Big Banks, others impute to "Jewish" socialism, and this with the same degree of *plausibility*. "Nihilism seeks to demolish the Aryan world by any means in order to substitute itself for it and enthrone in its place Jewish domination," etc.<sup>34</sup> But it is not enough to point to the Jews; that would be too obvious already; you must discover *behind* their baleful actions a hidden organization: the Alliance israélite universelle, founded in 1860 and "secretly bringing together the scattered Jews," will do the trick.<sup>35</sup> And behind the

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<sup>33</sup> A. de Boisandré. *Socialistes et Juifs: la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Librairie antisémite, 1903), 24.

<sup>34</sup> J. d'Auteroche. *La France antisémite*, 14.6.1890, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Tilloy, *Le Péril juif*, 44.

organization, we can and must suspect "the existence of a secret Jewish government" that "dreams of subjugating the world."<sup>36</sup>

Conspiratorial reasonings, "bizarre" from the point of view of non-contradiction, are just as surprising in the mode of their pieces of evidence: one will remark that deviance from the rules of deciphering the world are completed with a deviance in regard to the rules of debate. Outlining a radical thesis, supposedly unsuspected and all-encompassing, the advocates of conspiratorial thought are content with little by way of proof; they accumulate tenuous indices, spurious facts; they put them end to end and loudly celebrate their triumph. They can say that they had good reasons to do so: if there is a secret conspiracy, there would not be an abundance of direct evidence and the evil-doers would do everything to destroy it. If you remain skeptical, your attitude strongly suggests that you are more or less consciously a stakeholder in the Conspiracy, and your reticence is thus proof added to the sum. It is permissible to respond to those of little faith that, if an immense conspiracy is rigorously kept secret, it would not be possible to prove it directly, it would thus be reasonable to satisfy oneself with an accumulation of indices, circumstantial evidence, tenuous taken one by one, heterogeneous, but worthy of consideration because of their *masse*. The conspiratorial mind, then, in its various forms, produces huge books bringing together pieces of evidence of this kind. *La France Juive*, by Édouard Drumont, is thus - this fact is overlooked - very little *his work*: it is 80% composed of journal clippings from the 1880s, well selected, aligned and grouped together... But the last line of the second volume of this obsessional compilation is a cry for deliverance, and in Latin if you please: "*Liberavi animam meam*."

Weak in "good logic," this style of mind has obvious psychic advantages: insofar as even objections reinforce the thesis, it allows one to come to an impregnable conclusion. As remarked by a recent seeker of a vain goodwill in attempts to dialogue with revisionists: "If the group takes the position that concentration camp deaths were all made up by Jews in a conspiracy including Joe Stalin, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower ..., then it may indeed be impossible to prove any murders to them. They may claim that the news films were faked, the Nazis' own tons of records were faked and all the witnesses have been lying."<sup>37</sup>

### **How the conspiratorial mind breaks away**

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<sup>6</sup> Copin-Albancelli. *La conjuration juive contre le monde chrétien. (Le drame maçonnique)* (Paris: Renaissance du livre, 1909), 366 & 444.

<sup>7</sup> Regal, *Anatomy of Judgment*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1990, 98.

The prevalence of certain schemata and sequences allows us to discern programs and tendencies, to group together "ideological families" and to locate argumentative *slopes*, manners of supporting a thesis that, from the outside, could seem inappropriate, improper, or perverse. Outside of these "families," that which was convincing appears absurd: we might speak here of a *cognitive break*. A few words on this notion. IN my recent *Dialogues de sourds: Traité de rhétorique antilogique*, I draw up a rhetorics of misunderstandings around the hypotheses of such argumentative and cognitive breaks, which can be found in the discourses that circulate in the public sphere.<sup>38</sup> If argumentative incomprehension hinged banally on misunderstandings - mal entendus, misheard things - it would be enough to unplug our ears, to be patient and gracious, to pay better attention. But in certain cases, those classed by J.-F. Lyotard as "différends," humans do not understand their mutual reasonings because, speaking the same language, they do not deploy the same *rhetorical code*. This notion of "code" assumes that, in order to persuade, to make oneself understood argumentatively and to understand one's interlocutor, one must dispose - among the competences mobilized - of *common rules* of the arguable, the knowable, the debatable, the persuadable. And that a problem arises if one of these rules is not regulated by a Reason universal, transcendental and ahistoric: if these rules are not the same everywhere and for everyone.

Thus, between those who, on the one hand, inflexibly separate that which is and that which ought to be, indicative and imperative judgments, and those, on the other, who make of the science of what is the premise of a goal of stipulating what ought to be, a gap yawns that modern history has shown unbridgeable. Those who think the future is fundamentally unknowable and those who think that reasoning is above all being able to predict what will occur are superposed on the preceding pair.

What is important from a socio-cultural, sociological point of view is seeking to establish precisely in what given conjuncture, at what point of the social topography, certain lines of reasoning cease to persuade. The Moscow trials and the atrocious crimes of the "Bukharin-Trotsky gang" working against the Revolution from the first days of October traced a clean line in the world of the prewar left between those who believed this "myth" and those who didn't bite.

I have neither the time nor the space to treat of this subject - which seems to me an essential problem in the history of ideas - at length. I will limit myself to sketching the case history of the left/right dissemination of conspiratorial reasonings.

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<sup>38</sup> Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2008. See also: "Doxa and Cognitive Breaks," *Poetics Today* 23:3 (Fall 2002), pp.513-537.

## **On both the right and the left**

The conspiratorial vision of the social realm first characterized rightwing ideologies, forming a criterion - the criterion par excellence - of their classification. On the right, this vision is indeed "logical" in the psycho-social sense of this word: those who think traditions are sacrosanct and see them being eroded under the inexorable blows of modernization could be led to suppose that this erosion is desired and orchestrated by Villains. To these minds, society was working perfectly well up until the day when it suffered the deleterious acts of the congenital enemies of Nation, Order and Truth. The idea of a *structural evil* is foreign to them, just as the idea of people villainous-by-position, rather than by nature, escapes them.

Nevertheless, you can see a conspiratorial hermeneutics appear vaguely in romantic socialisms. Thus, in the works of the forgotten founder of "messianism" J.-M. Hoene-Wroński, we see, in lieu of a sociomachy of progress, a sort of *gothic novel* of the greatest darkness. His vision of the conjuncture he lived in claimed to "reveal to men [sic] the effective and uninterrupted existence of mystic sects, or rather gangs, that knowingly have the infernal goal of impeding contemporary mankind from attaining its destiny, in order to throw it into the abyss whence these mysterious gangs draw their Satanic inspiration. [...] It is a fact," Wroński adds, "as real as it is terrible and only escaping from men's attention because of its inconceivable anomaly, that there do indeed exist in the midst of mankind such infernal beings, leagued against the new human race." <sup>39</sup>

In the socialist discourse of the Second International, we inevitably find an abundance of conspiratorial-type reasonings: it is not enough to say that social wounds are "inherent" to capitalism and that they "will disappear" with it; you must also say they are "desired" by the bourgeoisie, according to the judicial topos *is fecit cui prodest*. Bourgeois society has an interest in increasing the workers' misery in order to break the morale of the class it dominates; while feigning a democratic benevolence, it favours - underhandedly - everything that might add to their wretchedness. Such an argumentative paradigm is applied to alcoholism, for example, around 1900, which allows advocates of that position to reject blame onto the dominant class and to exonerate the people: "Indeed, alcoholism is at once an effect of the current social organization and a precious support for the society that engenders it."<sup>40</sup> Food adulteration, the insalubriousness of cities, prostitution, growing crime rates -

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<sup>39</sup>Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński. *Messianisme, ou réforme absolue du savoir humain* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1847), vii.

<sup>40</sup> *L'Action syndicale* [Lens], 6 December 1908, p. 1.

these are immutably explained as caused by the bourgeois, organized by them with the vainly criminal goal of perpetuating their reign.

### **Many other points to be addressed**

I will limit myself to rapidly signalling the links between conspiratorial logic with several other connate "mental mechanisms." With, for example, what we label *demonization*, another recurrent, metamorphous logic that appears again and again throughout modernity in successive ideological rags. The "demonization" of adversaries and their ideas and the creation of demonic enemies who do evil for evil's sake and who must be destroyed are long-term [longue-durée] phenomena that remain at work today, as O'Roure's recent study, *Demons by Definition: Social Idealism, Religious Nationalism and the Demonizing of Dissent*<sup>41</sup>, shows. It is no accident that the word *demonization* has entered the vocabulary of the media in recent years - and since then, can be heard on everyone's lips.

Connateness again: the conspiratorial mind and the reasoning of *ressentiment*. The intertwining here is even so frequent that to my mind, these two categories must be fused: we can, with abundant historical *exempla*, show that together these things form one of those indissociable complexes, well attested in modernity, that I have designated a "logic."

To relate, then, this demonic reasoning with the "genealogical" category of *ressentiment*, analyzed by Nietzsche and Max Scheler<sup>42</sup> as well as in an essay that I published not too long ago<sup>43</sup> are, in fact, the great inventors of conspiratorial reasoning. I characterize *ressentiment* as a mode of production of meaning, values, identarian images, moral, political and civic ideas that aims to reverse dominant values - *Umwertung der Werte* - and absolutize "other" values, the inverse of the prevailing ones, values supposedly belonging to a demanding and dispossessed group. The rhetoric of *ressentiment* serves two concomitant ends: demonstrating that the present situation is a total injustice, persuading others of the inversion of the values that is located in the heart of *ressentiment*, **and** explaining the inferior condition of one's own by rejecting *ad alteram*

<sup>1</sup> New York: Lang, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogie des Morals*. ► *La Généalogie de la morale*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1964. Édition de poche: Idées/Gallimard, s.d. – Scheler, *L'Homme du ressentiment*. [Trad. de *Über Ressentiment und Moralischen Werturteil*]. Paris: Gallimard, 1970. Voir aussi Max Scheler, *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*. [Trad. de *Die Wissenformen und die Gesellschaft*]. Londres: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. \*\*\*\*\*ADD ENGLISH CITATIONS\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>3</sup> *Les Idéologies du ressentiment*. Montréal: XYZ Éditeur, 1995. Rééd. en format de poche, 1997.

*partem* all the defeats they have suffered. The powerful adversaries that ideologies of resentment give themselves pass their time hatching plots and ceaselessly setting traps - and as these malevolent machinations are hardly confirmed by observation, one must postulate that there exists an immense secret conspiracy - and convince oneself of its existence as soon as the hypothesis is entertained. The conspiratorial vision of the world thus goes hand-in-hand with ideologies of resentment: because of the fact that some people are seen in a privileged position and are the objects of impotent envy, they are assumed to have a harmful project of domination (it would be wonderful to see their respect as somehow *innocent*), and an ultimate goal of hyperdomination and a total stripping of the disadvantaged.

One might also relate the conspiratorial-resentimental mind and the practice of *amalgamation*. The principal simplification of the mind of resentment is the "rule of the single enemy"<sup>44</sup> with its great argumentative method, *amalgamation*. Our enemies must have "but one head," so that we can hope to strike them down with a single blow. The diversity of their opinions, interests and modes of being must only be a "smoke-screen" hiding once again a vast, evil-doing agreement.

Sociomachies - whether they be socialist, anti-clerical, ultra-catholic, anti-Semitic - all lead to representing society as a clash between *two camps* in a combative Manichaeism. For the 19th century's Catholics, there was on the one hand "the Army of God," the "Christian Homeland"; and on the other, those who wanted to tear the Cross down, wage war against God - the party of "unbelief, atheism and revolutionary Jewry".<sup>45</sup> This struggle transcends the country's borders. "At the present moment, the hatred of God is being organized into an international conspiracy." These two camps - the "enemies of religion and its friends" - are obviously irreconcilable. Victory will come for the camp of the Good, and *La Croix*, a Catholic paper, busies itself with promoting the imminence of Armageddon:

The thieves, secularizers, persecutors, Freemasons, Jews and Prussians bow their heads now before honest people, Catholics and Frenchmen.

### **The advantage of one method**

"The plotomaniacal imagination"<sup>46</sup> once again has a bright future in front of it. The

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<sup>44</sup> Defined in my essay, *La Parole pamphlétaire. Contribution à la typologie des discours modernes* (Paris: Payot, 1982, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> *La Croix*, 3.7. 1889, 1; following quotation: Vaudon, *L'Évangile du Sacré-Cœur*, 335.

<sup>46</sup> The term is P.-A. Taguieff's.

"paranoia" of the persecuted-persecutor and the Manichaeism of millenarists have always been compatible: radical ideologies yesterday and today have displayed a clear penchant for integrating diabolical causality into their persuasive mechanisms, a penchant suppressed, however, by their consciousness (which is not wholly erased) of its affinity with fascist and anti-Semitic visions. The conspiratorial logic prospering today in the anti-globalization movement and anti-Zionist leftism is nothing very new: the permanent resurgence of anti-Semitic themes in the revolutionary movement between the Commune and the Great War shows how this has always been a temptation and a possible "slope."

The advantage of the historico-rhetorical approach is to *extract* the reasoning schemata that characterize a historically situatable "mind" - and not to label things "belief," "unreason," "paranoia,"<sup>47</sup> thus creating *black boxes* with no explicative value. Nor to impute to a given moment or in a doxic and societal sector a manner of thinking that derives its meaning over the long term [longue durée] and across the dynamics of its avatars.

It would also be important to show all of the forms - including the benign ones - of conspiratorial thought, in their scope and their attenuated and diluted spread, that we cannot usefully label as a whole with a term from pathology or relate only to "extremist" ideologies: so many people come to irrevocable conclusions based on vague, doubtful, lacunary data, so many jump to conclusions before an arduous, uncertain probabilistic reasoning, so many tend to seek and find external guilty parties when things are not going well, that we must ask ourselves where this need for self-intoxication comes from and what feeds it. Between the Holocaust denier and the fine folks who view all "official truths" with suspicion, there is a margin. What, in the logic I have described, should in any case retain our attention, is the variety of its intensity and its condensation, as well as its universality as a tendency.

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<sup>47</sup> Édouard Drumont was a paranoiac, Michel Winock declares in a footnote at the beginning of his *Édouard Drumont & Cie* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). "Paranoid? Who cares! He is read, celebrated, taken seriously." I refer here to Raymond Boudon, *The Analysis of Ideology*, trans. Malcolm Slater, (Paris: Fayard, 1986).