

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reflections on the Popularity of 'Conspiracy Mentalities'

Serge Moscovici

In this text from a lecture made in 2006, Serge Moscovici (1925–2014) seeks to update his earlier work on the 'conspiracy mentality' (Moscovici, 1987) by considering the relationships between social representations and conspiracy mentality. Innovation in this field, Moscovici argues, will require a thorough description and understanding of what conspiracy theories are, what rhetoric they use and what functions they fulfill. Specifically, Moscovici considers conspiracies as a form of counterfactual history implying a more desirable world (in which the conspiracy did not take place) and suggests that social representations theory should tackle this phenomenon. He explicitly links conspiracy theories to works of fiction and suggests that common principles might explain their popularity. Historically, he argues, conspiracism was born twice: first, in the middle ages, when their primary function was to exclude and destroy what was considered as heresy; and second, after the French Revolution, to delegitimize the Enlightenment, which was attributed to a small coterie of reactionaries rather than to the will of the people. Moscovici then considers four aspects ('themas') of conspiracy mentality: 1) the prohibition of knowledge; 2) the duality between the majority (the masses, prohibited to know) and 'enlightened' minorities; 3) the search for a common origin, an 'Ur-phenomenon' that connects historical events and provides a continuity to history (he notes that such a tendency is also present in social psychological theorizing); and 4) the valorization of tradition as a bulwark against modernity. Some of Moscovici's insights in this talk have since been borne out by contemporary research on the psychology of conspiracy theories, but many others still remain fascinating potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: social representations; conspiracies; counterfactual thinking; conspiracy mentality; history; antisemitism



Figure 1: Serge Moscovici speaking at the Balzan prize ceremony, Bern, 2003.

Note from the editors: This lecture should have been delivered in Rome at the 8th International Conference on Social Representations in 2006, but Serge Moscovici had to cancel his participation. We decided to translate and

publish this text by one of the leading social psychologists of his generation in view of the recent interest for beliefs in conspiracy theories in the social psychological literature. We found it unfortunate that it was not available to the community of researchers interested in this phenomenon. The translation was coordinated by Olivier Klein and is a joint effort by Éric Bonetto, Amélie Bret, Rodrigo Brito, Colomba Codaccioni, Sylvain Delouée, Sebastian Dieguez, Andreea Gruev-Vintila, Olivier Klein, Anthony Lantian, Grégory Lo Monaco, Anthony Piermatteo, Patrick Rateau, Julie Terache, Jean Louis Tavani, and Jais Troian. We thank Daniel Jolley for proofreading the final version and Claire Maillé for retyping Moscovici's version in order to make it editable. Olivier Klein assumes responsibility for all remaining errors. A PDF of the original French text, as distributed to all participants in this conference, is available in supplementary material. The footnotes were added by the translators. The initials of the author of the footnote are indicated at the end of each note. We thank the Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale (LPS, Aix-Marseille Université) and the Réseau Mondial Serge Moscovici (REMOSCO) for supporting this publication. We also express our gratitude to Denis and Pierre Moscovici, the author's sons, for allowing us to publish

this text. The abstract was written by Olivier Klein and Sebastian Dieguez.

#

Over the years, we have met on many occasions to discuss our views on Social Representations Theory. This, in my opinion, is by far the best and most heuristic theory of knowledge available in social psychology, the only one worth pursuing and discussing seriously and which, moreover, self-propagates.

I hope that you all have a reasonable level of sympathy for the important theme of our conference, Media and Society. In that case, you may ask yourselves, as professionals, why social psychologists, and even sociologists, do not show more concern about the state of the art. A large number of different things are called 'media' in the specialized literature. Many of them are aggregates of various concepts from diverse scientific fields: television and religion, the internet and money, et cetera. So it occurred to me that, if we want to grasp the relationships between media and society, we should rather forget such aggregates and pick a significant and contemporary issue relevant to all of us. Accordingly, this will be my starting point.

Years ago, I was part of a group whose ambition was to define the major themes that social psychology should address if it were to hold a worthy place among the social sciences. Each of the volumes published following those group lectures outlined a problem and a theoretical sketch of the research that had been or should be pursued. With some reservations, the third and last volume seems to me to be the best,¹ even though it focused on a subject that was untimely: conspiracy theories. Nothing makes a book more likely to be forgotten than a topic that is untimely, a phenomenon wrapped in silence.

Yet, whatever the root cause, in the last twenty years the books that had conspiracies as their core plot boomed – the most famous being *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003). In the last years, this process has even accelerated with the upsurge of terrorism, the rivalry between huge states, and so on. And even the stern English weekly, *The Economist* (Dec. 19th, 2002), took notice, as it devoted a paper to the question: Why are conspiracy theories so popular? In a malicious and petulant style, the author lists the interventions of the media on the one hand and the masses' reactions on the other.²

However, we know that there are areas of expertise, and true expertise emerged in relation to this phenomenon, with documented and fascinating works. What I have done to deserve being quoted, I couldn't say. As a matter of fact, when I reread this chapter written 20 years ago, in light of the questions raised by these many scholars, I recovered the charm of past ideas. Yet I also realized the limitations of my point of view at the time. The fact is I then considered so-called conspiracy theories to be a trait of the psychology of active minorities.³ It is hardly surprising that what one knows about any phenomenon depends on the theory on which our mind is focused. While one is supposed to stay open-minded, achieving some discovery

demands a mind sharpened on a single track – the famous *one-track mind*.

Indeed, looking at the most recent works on conspiracies, we see that they highlight the decisive importance of social representations. One of the most prolific and talented authors, Taguieff⁴ (2004), takes over the concept. This explains sufficiently why I resumed my work from 1987,⁵ yet in a very different perspective. Two reasons account for this. First, the methodical repetition of concepts applied to new phenomena erases the specific character of the latter. What is gained in breadth is lost in depth. One cannot hope for very novel results. Then, it is a matter of reformulating the questions asked by others, as they express a general interest while respecting their original spirit. The very fertility of our theory depends on it.

All the characteristics of representations, as we usually see them, have in common that they establish a *reference*. Speaking of social representations, we can say that we actually refer to someone or something, a group, an object, education, illness, and so forth. In our times of media plurality and popular boom of 'conspiracy theories', what tends to be lost in social representations is their reference to a privileged object. This process is symptomatic: Even more than content, the overall meaning of reality is an inseparable part of the requirement for a new conspiracy theory. The representations that allow such a change are rather those held by 'someone': a person, but most often a group who strives to undo what has happened, to fulfill its common destiny, to assess a misdeed, to name a hope or a desire.

For that group, it is, therefore, a matter of thinking or acting *as if* – Vaihinger's famous *als ob*.⁶ As if one of the conditions of reality had been changed, or as if it could be changed. The American novelist Philip Roth considers this option so well grounded that he didn't hesitate to write a novel: *The Plot against America* (Roth, 2004) in which he assumes that Lindbergh, the famous aviator, is elected president of the United States in 1940 instead of Roosevelt. Decorated by Hitler, he wants to keep his country out of the war. The author considers all the consequences of this policy, especially the persecutions against Jews, exactly as if these imaginary facts were historical facts.

Playing on the theme of conspiracy, this novel calls for a double observation. First, it informs us about the bond between the creation of such a representation and the individual or collective thought experiments in science allowing to capture hypothetical phenomena. Further, it teaches that, from there, rather marginal or even prohibited questions arise, which can only yield useless information. As in ancient 'Uchronia',⁷ this involves revisiting a story that everyone is supposed to know. And while taking inspiration from it, one tells the story that could have happened had one event been different.

What if Lindbergh had been elected president of the United States? Or if Napoleon had not lost the 1870–71 war against Germans? The consideration of alternative representations, of past and present outcomes, of what could have been, requires a new and often strange antecedent that was not present in reality, in order to justify such an alternative. For example, based on the premise

that Kennedy had died as a victim of a conspiracy, the CIA has been rumoured to have created an AIDS virus that was supposed to be used against Cuba on a secret agent who deliberately murdered the president.⁸ In a nutshell, all these cases involve rewriting history.

We can, therefore, speak of a representation of counterfactual logic. This may lead us into an illusion. Namely, that real facts, effective actions that we can scientifically assess, lie in the background of those alternative representations of the conspiracy theory, with all the attendant consequences. All those representations have something in common: They depict a possible world, in the sense that Leibniz or Moore consider a virtual world, which allows us to choose and imagine a better reality. Some virtual history studies, which are now multiplying, imbue all those speculations with intellectual consistency. In the contemporary attacks against *i.a.* the discovery of America, slavery, or the role of Swiss banks during the Second World War, this idea of virtual or counterfactual social representation implies that progress toward a better world has been impeded. As the better world is no longer visible and seems out of reach, this setback transforms the mind or the worldview of groups as they think of what could have been. In sum, they consider themselves to be the victims of history.

To the extent that those virtual histories as well as historians themselves intervene in the political debate, initiate mediatized trials about the 'past that does not pass',⁹ such virtual representations take on a normative quality in relation to reality. We are familiar with the now-common theme of many debates: If such a conquest had not taken place, and had it not aroused the complicity of a dominant country, the fate of some victims would have been different. Appraised with some perspective and an appetite for research, virtual or counterfactual social representations open a new horizon to our theory.

The times are auspicious for this kind of boldness that corresponds to new approaches towards reality and to practices that collide with *Realpolitik*.¹⁰ The latter subsumes a unique and unquestionable representation of reality. We can even go further and wonder disrespectfully whether we are dealing with a pure coincidence, whether conspiracy theories are so popular when virtual or counterfactual history is so widespread and normative. Michelet¹¹ said that 'Each era dreams of the next one'. No doubt, but for all that, it does not escape the nightmare of the previous one.

Two Conditions for Studying This Field

We like to think that social representations can open up a new area of research there. However, it will not be long before we realize that the contents, images, themes, patterns are persistent. And also that they retain a highly collective nature: 'the themes of conspiracy are quintessentially social productions rather than the figments of individual "sick minds". These social themes are intimately imbricated with the value system of society, and articulate some of its constitutive concerns and prevalent attitudes' (Zukier, 1987: 88). It would be a profound mistake not to

take this into account, not to specify the conditions under which this research should be carried out.

The thematogenic currents

In some respects¹², it is hardly surprising that 'rumors', considered in their plain meaning, are often the origin of 'conspiracy theories' and contribute to their propagation. Attempting to explain it would take too long and, in any case, I do not have a good explanation to provide. But we refuse to believe that such representations are born of mental rumination or collective chatter and that they circulate, as is said, by word of mouth. In short, their origin is contingent and their propagation contagious. This is so, quite simply, because they do not refer to a perceptible and immediate exteriority, nor do they result from daily observation or exchanges within a group. All those theories are full of typical expressions, of repetitions, of traditional judgements and of a pastiche of historical events or figures, including freemasons, for example.

All this may seem fanciful, but it is not. Consider that the *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*¹³ are the pastiche of a pamphlet directed against Napoleon III,¹⁴ a mystification, as has been acknowledged, where the 'Elders of Zion', the Jews, replace the emperor. The theme of the original is found in the copy, which is full of prejudices disguised as arguments. The religious or racial representations condense these prejudices into formulas, which are then used, as we know, by newspapers and by a public that is fond of them. In short, it can be assumed that some patterns (sickness, nationalism, etc.), extracted from a corpus of languages, common knowledge, and others, converge at some point in the public, the media, reinforcing the themes and the frequency of their expression. The media delight the public with ideas and beliefs which they fervently hope will be legitimized.

In his book on suicide, Durkheim describes the suicidogenic currents 'of pressure and disenchantment' and 'of metaphysical or religious representations that reduce those obscure feelings into formulas'. But he may go too far when he says that 'these currents are collective, they have, by virtue of their origin, an authority which they impose upon the individual' (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 173). In such a perspective, there would be no communication, no common mental content, no demand from individuals, no society that thinks of itself as a society.

In search of a theory

It must be twenty years now that I have been reading stories of conspiracy, traditional or contemporary, and books dedicated to them. It is not, I realize, out of vain curiosity, but because I am trying to answer a question. At any rate, it is clear that the conspiracy necessarily involves a range of social representations about diverse patterns, historical periods, and groups. Some of these, it must be added, are real, while others are pure chimeras. I have also tried – which is not common – to properly study the links between the various social representations, to see if they follow a logic and form a system. I do not mean to say that I doubted that such a theory existed, but I did not find any that met these criteria. Popper (2002) devoted

a very interesting chapter to conspiracy theories. Yet the only one he mentions is that of Karl Marx and his successors as a 'conspiracy theory of a society' (125). This is why the philosopher proposes, as a vaccine, the industrial society that solves its problems according to 'individual social actions and their unintended (and often unwanted) social consequences' (ibid.).

Although I have abandoned marxism, this example among others has reinforced my belief that such conspiracy theories do not exist. If they are so called, it is in order to downgrade them effortlessly, as irrational aberrations or superstitions. That is, these are labels and ways of speaking. In any case, for the sake of a potential description, it seemed to me that we were dealing with a *mentality* and that social representations about them are grouped in a 'conspiracy mentality'.

We can see in it an objectification of a historical experience, similar to that studied by Weber under the name of 'spirit of capitalism', as the result of religious passions and beliefs in our secular history, or yet as a stratification of representations and practices. A superb example can be found in Marc Bloch's *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924/1983), these English and French kings who were believed to have the power to heal scrofula by laying their hands on the afflicted. I do not wish, however, to discuss here the virtues or vices of the notion of mentality, of which we have neither been able to rid ourselves, nor find an adequate substitute for it.¹⁵

The fog that surrounds the formation of a mentality, hence its meaning and content, does not come from an absence of documents or testimonies, but from their very overabundance and from the fact that they intersect or alter their shape. I am inclined to believe that this is a fog-like the one that surrounds the emergence of a hero in a culture, such as Faust or Don Quixote, or the emergence of technologies such as the horse-drawn carriage, the printing press, or the windmills. A strange impression emerges from their formation: A broad variety of versions have grafted themselves onto one another and have been used for a diversity of purposes in a timeless past that escapes us. This is why what seems to constitute the 'beginnings' of a conspiracy is not able to explain it. At most, it allows locating its meaning and content.

One might say, suggestively, that the conspiracy was born twice. The first time, during the emergence of a 'society of persecution' in the European Middle Ages, exerting deliberate, even institutionalized, violence against groups defined by their way of life, their beliefs or their physical traits (Moore, 1987). It was at this time, around the thirteenth century, that the Inquisition was implemented, and its subsequent action kept these fundamental characteristics. To put it bluntly: This institution used brutal techniques of interrogation and physical torture in the service of the Church, of the religious orders, and of an orthodox doctrine that was being developed.

However, this is not the essential defining trait of the Inquisition. The actual aim is to exclude, even destroy, what Saint Paul called "the man of anomie, the son of destruction",¹⁶ in short, heretics and heresy in general. For centuries, heresies appeared in Christianity, but in the Middle

Ages, a specific knowledge was required to purge them from the people. Thus, for example, in order to exterminate Catharism, as Moore observes, the Church's decrees of 1184 'consist of a general application of the principles and sanctions of legal infamy to those suspected of being heretics and their accomplices. The method for detecting them is the inquisition, in its successive forms; the law of infamy also opens the way for the use of torture... in groups specifically designed and defined for this purpose' (Moore, 1991: 160).

The Jews as heretics of Christianity? Why not? They were the first and the most frequently named, along with the alarming mass of lepers, as being the enemies of the Church's standard; the first, too, to be singled out and visibly stigmatized and treated as public enemies. The indefinable anxiety¹⁷ over them began to spread across the European continent. Inquisition and exclusion conceal internal violence. It is the face of the Devil that is recognized through the expression and crimes of these unnatural beings. It is particularly the Jews who, according to Norman Cohn,¹⁸ are seen in 'popular medieval representations' as 'children of the Devil, agents employed by Satan for the express purpose of combating Christianity and harming Christians' (Cohn, 1996: 26).

Such a prolific representation could not simply fade away and, as Nicole Jacques-Chaquin (1987: 72) notes in her insightful chapter 'Demonic Conspiracy':

What I will show is that, based upon written elements and misunderstood traditions, a totally imaginary figure gradually emerged, born of discursive constructions, and combining, without it being easy to show in which direction these influences were working, both a judicial practice (the trials) and a textual practice, that of erudites, men of law and the Church, producing gradually the stereotype of the 'demoniac sect'; and that the 'sworn' witch, member of the 'sect'; who was burned at the end of the trials and whose life, psychology, and motivations have been sifted by a large number of works, was a pure fiction, having only the faintest connection with the traditional 'caster of spells'.¹⁹

For almost a century, demonology has been taught as we now teach psychology, and, who knows, the subject is possibly the same. Out of curiosity, I read *De la démonomanie des sorciers*²⁰ a work of great insight and by a great scientist (Bodin, 1580/2016), impressive in many respects, and that has remained relevant. And also the famous *Marteau des sorcières*,²¹ which, when I was collaborating with feminist scholars, was widely read, so that its meaning became less esoteric. Without a doubt, the witches as a group is a chimeric group and their famous Sabbath, a very powerful figurative representation.

A one-sided interpretation of this society of persecution is at odds with mountains of scholarship. Whatever reservations we may have about some social representations of groups or about procedures for their exclusion from society, they have provided, retrospectively, an outline of the conspiracy mentality.

We also know that this mentality is specifically affirmed 'in the immediate aftermath of the French revolution on the basis of anti-Masonic rumours and legends exploited by Church propaganda and reaches its maturity, so to speak, in the years 1797–1799 through anti-Masonic and anti-encyclopedic works' (Taguieff, 2005: 33). What could be the vocation of these massive works, if not to strip any legitimacy to the Enlightenment, or any *raison d'être* to the great metaphysical revolution of history which, according to Burke,²² was to restore the aura of the abolished Church and monarchy? The hard work of these prolific writers aimed at persuading the public that what had occurred had in fact not occurred, that it was not the work of the French people, that it was an irreversible event. It was simply a conspiracy of which the masses were the victims.

I don't know if rumours or legends were necessary because, in a sense, the conspiracy was a familiar representation, concrete enough for everyone to grasp it. After all, the 'societies of thought', described by the historian Collins,²³ devoted to the idea of revolution and which contributed to its success, were a minority acting in the dark, such as the Jacobin clubs, and later dozens of conspiracy societies and among them the communists. But these traditionalist writers considered conspiracy as an autonomous process, a conjuration inspired by a misleading experience. A common *topos*²⁴ of this period is that nature achieves its goals through the blindness of men, therefore 'behind their backs'. However, chimeric groups, like nature, leading 'men by trickery', thanks to their epistemic omnipotence, were new. And the regulatory idea of the conspiracy mentality. This may not be the greatest idea of modernity, but it is certainly the most efficient of all fictional representations. Thus, it will serve us here.

The themata of the conspiracy mentality

If we grant this historical nexus (Ginzburg, 1976), we must now grasp some general features of the representations associated with such a mentality. These traits could lead to a unilateral interpretation that is difficult to validate. Taguieff (2005) summarized the three principles underlying conspiracy beliefs:

- Nothing happens by accident. Everything that happens is the result of hidden intentions or wills (invisible, obscure, or dark).
- Nothing is as it seems. Appearances are always deceptive, hence one has to unmask them.
- Everything is connected, but in an occult way. And if everything is connected, then we can explain even the most insignificant event by deducting it from a single cause.

As easy as it is to accept these clear and distinct principles, their scope for application seems problematic. Lévy-Bruhl and Bergson,²⁶ attributed the first two to the primitive mentality, and the three as a whole to the tradition of suspicion in modern ideologies. Inevitably, therefore, they tend to accentuate the magical attributes of the conspiracy.

But I would like to approach this subject of scandal for reason and for our social life in a different way, as a tectonic of the representations of our time that we could study in detail through our media. We can contribute to this work by highlighting themata²⁵, some of which, well-known and familiar, are aggregated into a *sui generis* mentality irreducible to no other.

The prohibition of knowing

That which is mysterious, secret, is a ubiquitous themata in the sphere of knowledge. According to Simmel (1906: 462), 'Secrecy [...] i. e., which is effective through negative or positive means of concealment, is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity'. Yet the usual description of 'secrecy' is incomplete. It is easy to see that the myth of the forbidden fruit is the oldest in our culture. It has always been understood as a prohibition of knowledge. The secret, the mysterious, is felt as a prohibited knowledge remaining outside the individual. It grips and shakes the human mind by plunging it into a specific emotional state of craving and constraint. It is that very experience that he goes through when facing what goes beyond his conception and understanding, the unfamiliar, the extraordinary.

Regardless of how this prohibition is justified, it distinguishes between 'unthinkable' and 'unspeakable' knowledge. It has been referred to as 'tremendum' or 'altum'.²⁷ Leaving aside the various interpretations, the knowledge traditionally defended concerned more or less, to a greater extent than today, the *arcana dei*, secrets of religion, and *arcana imperii*, State secrets. They have a common imperative: *noli altum sapere sed time*.²⁸

This themata is not based on deliberation, nor does it express the awareness of any committed transgression. Rather, it is an immediate element of our mentality. In a way, it is the themata anchoring all representations to each other and to reality in general. This fact is beyond question, it suffices to see how much each book on the topic insists on the 'secret archives': the secret services, secret meetings, the mob, and others which are involved in the quest for the Holy Grail at the heart of a conspiracy. Nevertheless, secrecy expresses a unique kind of knowledge, which is the metaphor diametrically opposed to the profane, the 'sacred' metaphor characterizing who has been initiated to this knowledge and participates in its mystery. Macrobius²⁹ wrote: 'Only a single elite knows the true secret, while the rest is content to worship it'.

It would be too long to debate whether this possibility is still worth mentioning, if we can still speak of 'bewildering discrepancy between the mixture of horror, contempt and derision philosophers felt for the ignorant, superstitious, fickle and unpredictable *mobile vulgus*³⁰ and the benevolent compassion they manifested each time they thought of the *people* as the prospective objects of their pastoral tutelage' (Bauman, 1987: 75).

This is not how the world works

It stems from the above that the second themata of the conspiracy is related to the incarnation of secret knowledge. It should not come as a surprise that the most visible

and influential participants of conspiracies to have been reported are collectives. Zukier (1987: 93) writes:

Conspiracies are a distinctly social phenomenon. The collective nature of conspiracies underlies the linguistic construction of this reality: *conspiracies*, *collusions*, but also plots – from the French *complot*, or the Old French *complotte*, all emphasize the collective planning and agreement, and the joint action of different people, who as a group devise sinister schemes and evil actions. Indeed, the conspiratorial themes indicate that conspiracies are quintessentially crimes of solidarity, in solidarity, and against solidarity.

However, a social world would not be a social world if it were not divided, if there was not a permanent duality between minorities and majorities or masses. The history of conspiracies is the history of their separation or opposition. On the whole, minorities are real or chimerical groups, believed to have had access to secret knowledge, who can read between the lines of texts and events (Strauss, 1952), and usually are persecuted or hide. Certainly, their list always includes the following: Freemasons, Jews, Socialists, Jesuits. Recently the *Opus dei* was added, as well as those societies retaining the seeds of knowledge described by Simmel and whose 'order was the form under which seeds could be preserved and fortified, a service rendered in particular by the Order of the Illuminati.³¹ This is a name that once referred to a real group, which is now remembered as if it existed in contemporary conspiracy stories'³² (Taguieff, 2005).

No wonder, then, that the majority, the masses that suffer the prohibition of knowing are mostly made up of passive actors, victims of conspiracies. As written in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: 'one must take into account the cowardice, the inconsistency, as well as the inability to understand of the crowd, and estimate the conditions of its own life and prosperity. The crowd is blind' (Rollin, 2000: 28). On this minority-majority themata, to which I once devoted a study, I have not much to add, only that it is usually included in a representation that recalls the opposition of heretics and the faithful in the 'society of persecution'. Hence the designation of heretics as apostates.

Yet we must also consider the archaism of origins, which dispenses from any rational justification and surrounds all events and groups with an aura of truth, and allows drawing a succession of consequences that are not subject to any assessment and that do not need one. One thing will always be missing from the most perfect reconstruction of the historical circumstances of a revolution that involves a minority, as was the case with the French Revolution: the principle that makes its representation plausible. Undoubtedly, minorities are most insistently associated with conspiracy during periods of social unrest.

On that matter, Trotsky had this to say: 'The history of revolutions and of all wars proves invariably that a class which is threatened or has been ruined is inclined to see the reason of their misfortunes not in themselves,

but in the agents and messengers of foreigners' (Trotsky, 1950: 126).

When a revolution breaks out or when a government falls, expatriates return to their country, where they are supposed to have secretly prepared the unrest. During the Russian Revolution, Trotsky adds, 'everything that was unclear, unusual or enigmatic about the Bolsheviks – their novel ideas, their swaggering behavior, and their disdain for old and new authorities – now found one simple striking explanation, persuasive in its absurdity: They were German spies' (126).

Usually, such mysteries not only elicit astonishment or rejection, on occasion they can also appear convincing, even attractive, *in virtue of the principle which states that small causes can produce large effects*.

Thus, small minorities – Jews, Jesuits, the Illuminati – assumed to be initiated into the mysteries of the world, can conspire for war or revolution, and some believe that they succeed. If this fact underlies the framework of shared representations and is accepted, it is because the principle that I have just outlined is both realistic and seductive. Just as it is realistic and seductive to believe that, in our brain, which is similar to that of anthropoids, small changes can trigger great leaps.

Primal history

The idea of secrecy underlies the fascination for forbidden things and the revelation of mysterious or disturbing things. In fact, the quest for this secret is merely the first expression of a task that is common to all religions, philosophies, and mentalities, which is to provide a representation of the world. In so doing, this arouses a demand for exciting explanations. This is bound to happen well before agents have become mature enough to actually meet this need. It is understandable therefore that one of the primary tasks assigned to 'conspiracies' is to explain, to attribute causes to past – or present – phenomena, such as the French Revolution or globalization. Yet regardless of the relevance of causes and the importance of effects, the quest for explanations is not specific to a single form of thinking, nor to a single representation of the world. In a sense, everything can serve as an explanation, so nothing can be singled out by that explanation. The impression that everything explains and can be explained is called magic. As Mauss thought and Wittgenstein wrote: 'Superstition is the belief in the causal nexus'³³ (1922: 5.1361).

It has seldom been noted that just like theological and political conceptions according to Leo Strauss (1952), conspiracies are a matter of common sense rather than science. Nietzsche provided a good description of the role of causality in common sense. Namely, we entertain the idea that efficient causes derive from voluntary actions: Searching for a reason means searching for an *intention* and an *agent*. The question *warum*³⁴ always echoes the question *wozu*³⁵ while at the same time it begins to steer the answer, and it doesn't matter whether this is in a good or a bad direction. This is undoubtedly the subject on which I insisted in my earlier work (Moscovici, 1987). Rather than a counter-history, what is specific to conspiracy stories is a search for the origins, the Ur-phenomenon,³⁶ in a

word the *themata* of the origins or exemplary beginnings. Precisely because it is a matter of calling into question the forces as they really were in a history that took place – say, the French Revolution. We invoke the original – and in a sense eternal – powers, those that warrant a sense of ensured continuity.

We can still go further. To admit an origin goes beyond merely denying the evidence that challenges it. In contrast, there it is, arbitrarily criticizing facts that provide evidence on its behalf. Thus, with regard to the French Revolution, what Barruel³⁷ wants to show is evidence for a retrospective connection to original phenomena: 'All is in the direct line of succession, the Cathares, the Albigeois, the Knights Templars, and our Jacobins of the Occult Lodges, all proceed from the same parental stock' (Himmler, 1978: 221, our translation). The chain of history must obviously stop at some point, but it does not necessarily do so at a verifiable date or fact, because any history of this kind is in fact a counterfactual history, or because the historian deludes himself.

That said, one cannot rule out that history 'as it really was'³⁸ is the history of the victorious, to borrow from Ranke's expression, then the counter-history appears as that of the vanquished. However, this interpretation fails: first because it is ill-conceived to begin with, but also because it is conceived against the existing minorities whose persecution it justifies. As Himmler kept saying to his troops, in a language familiar to conspirators: 'This is the ideological struggle against all Jews, all Masons, all Marxists and all the churches in the world. These forces know it ... and I consider the Jews as their negating element, as the negative principle itself' (Himmler, 1978: 39, our translation).

But we must also consider the archaism of origins, which exempts from all rational justification and envelops all the events and all groups in an aura of truth. It makes it possible to conceive a series of consequences that is not subject to any examination and, besides, does not need it. There will always be something missing from even the most realistic and rational of all histories: its beginning, the single *Big Bang* of its birth. It is this singular event, however, which, as long as it fascinates, will seem to denote an Ur-phenomenon at work in history. In his research on *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*, Benjamin borrowed this notion from Goethe to seize an economic process as an Ur-phenomenon from which the Arcades proceeded (hence in the 19th century).³⁹ It may be that the condition emerging from the Ur-phenomenon, from its tradition, is only a semblance, but it is precisely the persistence of such semblance that provides its continuity.

If I allow myself to quote Himmler again, after talking about Benjamin, who was among the victims of nazism, it is not to be provocative, but to illustrate the nature of the judgments to which this semblance leads in the conspiracy mentality: 'I know the history of Christianity in Rome well...' Himmler said to his troops. 'I am convinced that the Roman emperors who exterminated the early Christians were the worst sleaze of cities, the worst Jews, the worst Bolsheviks that could be known' (Himmler, 1978: 92).

Let us finish at this point. I want to emphasize that the conspiracy mentality retrospectively connects a destination, an end, to an origin, just like a river's mouth would be connected to its spring. This is unquestionably what creates an impression of genesis, not of a causal intention. From this supposition, virtual social representations are chosen or imagined, in order to make this kind of genesis plausible, to make believe that what once has been can happen again tomorrow.

Given our bewildering ignorance of how the conspiracy mentality works, we can assume such an aggressive polarity of values. In general, histories will be invented following these rules, so that a positive history comes to be attributed to a good origin, and a negative history to a bad one.

In truth, in social psychology, we can on occasion follow such rules, for example when we explain racism with a negative origin, the authoritarian personality, or totalitarianism with closed thinking⁴⁰; and vice versa for the contrary examples. As research makes progress, we will manage to decrease the frequency of such explanations that combine genealogy and mentality.

We understand better why this rule fits the conspiracy mentality if we remember that representations are beliefs and, moreover, that they are retrospective. The result is familiar: for example, starting from Kennedy's death, one imagines an alternative to history, as I explained above. Thus, one feigns to discover what one already knew in the first place. The conclusion, be it a happy or unhappy ending, is known beforehand, although the process itself can be surprising. This practice is reminiscent of the lawyer's art, which rests on fiction, as Jankélévitch described: 'the defense will come to a certain conclusion propelled by the internal thrust of its argument – when in fact it comes to that conclusion because the conclusion itself wants it to' (Jankélévitch, 1959/2015: 18).⁴¹ In this sense, the conclusion is provided before the premise.

Graumann shares this view: 'Make-believe is involved in many conceptions of conspiracy whether there is a true conspirator actually plotting against our order and our institutions or just the concretization of our fears' (Graumann & Moscovici, 1987: 250). One has only to compare this process to that involved in turning the pages of a novel or watching the succeeding images of a movie on television or at the movie theater to understand why the conspiracy mentality spreads today at mass scale.

Modernity and tradition

In my age of innocence, I expected a retraction, at least I hoped for an apology, if only in Europe when the Holocaust was revealed to us in all its horror. It was not until I met Leon Poliakov⁴² that I became aware of the depth of anti-semitism in all areas of Western culture, including art, literature, and philosophy. I have managed to ignore this fact, as well as the way Proust and Joyce treat Bloch and Bloom⁴³ (rather less well than Shakespeare treats Shylock) in two of the greatest novels of our time, *In Search of Lost Time* and *Ulysses*.

Anyway, I knew at least that a cliché concerning Jews almost as offensive as being rich or parasitic was, in Nazi

parlance, that they were called revolutionaries or modernists. The 'final solution' would have made it possible not only to establish a German empire but also to return to an original Aryan religion once the Christian Church had been destroyed. This is not a mere rumor, a popular rumination of ideas, but a blood stream that runs through the semi-public discourse. Even the Pope writes to his sister after the concordat signed between the Vatican and fascist Italy: 'Praise the Lord! Everything that Freemasonry, that is, the Devil, has done against the Church and the Pope in Italy has been destroyed.'⁴⁴

This is a theme that conspiracy literature has taken up from tradition or that inspires theological thought. What I am trying to tell you is that, after the heresies of the 12th century, the Cathars and other minorities, the 'metaphysical' revolution of the French in the 18th century spread the philosophy of the Enlightenment and infused the energy of modernity into history. Saint-Simon proposes to substitute gravitation to God, and Auguste Comte a religion of progress.⁴⁵ Among the thinkers of the time, the conviction ran that it is possible to create a philosophy or science of man capable of providing a solution to politics and the organization of society as clear and rational as those achieved in the natural sciences. This conviction seemed clear and radical. No wonder, then, that everything representing tradition, religion and folklore was belittled to the level of prejudice, superstition, ignorance, together with their accompanying intolerance, fanaticism, and obscurantism.

Conceiving human history as a universal progression in the direction of reason and science, every stage of knowledge and life being superior to the previous one, necessarily entailed the superiority of the minority over tradition, analogous to the superiority of truth over error. I am only reminding you of all this, which is well-known to you.

No surprise, then, if the conspiracy mentality that emerged at the same time tended to overrate tradition, in an effort to save Christianity and even to restore the Church's authority. To experience all its weight and force was to escape as much as possible the influence of the novel and transitory, to grasp the trust and truth handed over from one generation to the next. This was needed in order to detach oneself from the modern understanding due to knowledge derived from the universal nature or modern society, meaning that humans and the social order had to be depicted as endowed with eternal and unitary attributes that were fully accessible to all, everywhere and at all times. Up to this day, most writings on conspiracies still rigorously apply the ancient saying '*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*'.⁴⁶ They are like time machines in a grail quest for a tradition, claiming that 'what was' and what has survived from the past holds legitimate answers to today's questions. They intend to offer a novel social representation – designed to be surprising – by looking backwards in order to find the roots of an ongoing conspiracy, be it in tales of travels to enchanted lands, or in the Jewish Cabal, in the rituals of Freemasonry or those of the Knight Templars. The goal is to convince a large audience, which is significant.

All these aspects of the genesis of representations can be captured by the concept of *authenticity*. This is to say that they share a content in which propagation is favoured by its origin and genealogical duration. The symbolic rule followed by the conspiracy mentality has been summed up by de Bonald⁴⁷ (1845: 163): 'All modern doctrine which is not as ancient as Mankind is a mistake'. The adoption by conspiracism of a long or infinite tradition 'as ancient as Mankind' aims at a secret truth. Here lie unsolvable mysteries, resembling the complex transmission of the Oedipus complex, or, as mentioned above, the link between antisemitism and the Holy Grail, in short from the very beginning to our times. Remember these verses by Chrétien de Troyes:⁴⁸ 'Dear sire, don't you see in Jesus Christ who wrote the new law and gave it to the Christians? The bad Jews, who should be slayed like dogs, hurt themselves and did ourselves good when they elevated him on the cross. They have destroyed themselves and saved us'.⁴⁹ Looking back, I am afraid I felt compelled to draw this connection, bearing on an issue I promised myself never to speak about.

Provisional Ending

Considering the fact that, until recently, conspiracies were hardly visible in our scientific horizon, it is understandable that we are progressing in a no man's land. I discovered in my first foray in this area that those interested in the topic sought simultaneously to explain these strange psychological and social phenomena, and to fight them. Through books and essays addressed to a broad audience, they wanted to denounce their nefarious effects. The mystery of how they persist despite their blatant irrationality, how they spread in conservative and antisemitic circles, and even the notorious Moscow trials⁵⁰ have prompted some researchers to go beyond social and ideological analyses and define their psychiatric or cognitive background, alleging the resemblance with paranoia or advancing more esoteric explanations.

Since then, we keep on looking for malign origins, such as fear, uncertainty, the ignorance of the crowds, or the 'discontent of civilization', to evil outcomes such as violence or racism. But it is always difficult to find a good measure between explanations and mere descriptions. My own inclination has been and still is, that our explanations will never be satisfactory as long as the 'material' itself is not better described in terms of recognized concepts, and as long as we devote more time gathering this material than welcoming it as it is. This is not an issue of methods, a question of standardizing or quantifying. Quite simply, we must know what we should include in this field of studies, which sometimes seems to encompass whatever bears the mark of esoterism.

And yet, it seems to me that the four themata and the symbolic or mental rules provide a reasonable framework for the time being. Although I have not mentioned it, we should include all these *figurae* whose value do not seem to change across time, from one narrative to the next – meaning these minorities or the so-called secret societies, the Illuminati, Freemasons, Protestants, and especially the Jews, who serve to represent them all. These

figurae, or allegorical images, ontologize, so to speak, the representations.

I haven't talked about them because, on the one hand, one can immediately see how much these themata display aspects of racism, especially that of the scapegoat, this focus on hatred and persecution. I find it difficult to believe that racism is 'merely' a means to exclude or discriminate, and not primarily a means to persecute, up to the sacrifice of the victim. On the other hand, this would lead us to reflect on the question of the double, that of the relationship between the existing group (women, Jews, etc.) and the chimerical group of demonic conspiracies. Indeed, I have always wondered how people could live knowing that they have to deal with dozens of Dr. Jekylls and Mr. Hydes, in their own building, street, and so forth.

I am trying to convey my awareness that several aspects of the conspiracy mentality remain enigmatic, unresolved. If my presentation had been more systematic, I would have started by saying that the social representations in question belong to the so-called polemical species that I described in other times.⁵¹ Essentially, they allude to a relationship between allies and opponents; they oppose mysterious hostile groups and submissive and confident groups. In short, according to the thirteenth century model, they oppose heretical minorities to faithful majorities. Therein lies, in my opinion, the definition of politics as a friend-foe relationship given by the lawyer who revised the racial laws of the Third Reich. Yes, this heretical-faithful relationship is the one that runs through most of the conspiracy stories I have heard about. Please remember that it was designed to justify the Inquisition and to vilify Cathars, Jews, and *tutti quanti*. The careful reader of these texts recognizes, even today, the inquisitorial tone of the language of these representations, an echo of a threat that comes from afar.

In the end, one wonders, maybe, why these books, these films, reach such large audiences. The idea that people want to alleviate the fears and insecurities of our present world is not false. Or do they do it out of ignorance, feeling attracted by everything that is magical, irrational? However, this idea offends everyone's sensitivity. It could also be that they are encouraged by common sense.

Be that as it may, one notes a particular affinity, even if it seems ambivalent, intriguing, and perverse, between this kind of story and the fundamental need that everyone feels to dramatize their passing life. This was possible in small, closed societies, where family quarrels and hatred, conspiracies, and hostilities between tribes were passed on from one generation to the next. Everything was reminisced in stories, sagas that appeared in broad daylight when life was too quiet and aspired to some drama. We also see it as an avatar of popular folktales, told and listened to as a consolation that avenged the vanquished of all and everything. But when dramatization arises in grave historical contexts – war, revolution, Kennedy's assassination, etc. – then the polemical representations, the inquisitorial tone arouse strong passions. Especially resentment, which affects our deep psychology (see Moscovici, 1987).

You may think I should have stopped these thoughts much earlier. I agree with that. The moral of all this is: If

you have achieved a theory of something, it is preferable to refrain from a theory of everything.

Notes

- ¹ Moscovici refers here to Graumann and Moscovici (1987). Translator's note. [OK].
- ² This sentence does not reflect the *Economist* article, which lists several examples of conspiracy theories (about 9/11, JFK's assassination, etc.) before trying to explain what attracts people to them (by invoking geopolitical factors mainly). At no point does the author of that article make a distinction between the media and the masses. Translator's note. [OK].
- ³ Moscovici is of course well known for his work on minority influence, which was one of his central research topics from the late 1960s until the 1980s. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴ Pierre-André Taguieff (1946–) is a French political scientist and sociologist who published influential works on prejudice, conspiracism and antisemitism especially. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁵ Moscovici (1987), a chapter in the Graumann and Moscovici (1987). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁶ The author refers here to Vahinger (1911). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁷ A *uchronia* is a narrative based on counterfactual history (e.g., JFK not being shot dead). The genre dates back to Antiquity (e.g., the Roman writer Livy described what would have happened if Alexander the Great had survived to attack Europe as planned). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁸ We have been unable to trace the source and the exact nature of this conspiracy theory, that seems to conflate two different well known CTs: i.e., that JFK was killed by the CIA and that the AIDS virus was created on purpose by the US government. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁹ The original text is ambiguous here: 'Le passé qui ne passe pas' could either mean that the 'past does not go away' or that 'the past can't be assimilated'. Translator's note. [JT].
- ¹⁰ This German term refers to an approach to politics based on actual circumstances and facts (as opposed to beliefs and ideology). Translator's note. [OK].
- ¹¹ According to Boucheron (2017), the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) wrote this quotation in 1842 in his notebook entitled 'Avenir? Avenir?' ('Future? Future?'). Translator's note. [AB].
- ¹² This neologism refers to the concept of 'themata' (see note 26).
- ¹³ Widely distributed fake pamphlet describing a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Although it dates from the 19th century tsarist Russia, it is still in circulation now and continues to fuel antisemitism (Bronner, 2003). Translator's note. [OK].
- ¹⁴ French emperor (from 1852 to 1870). Translator's note. [OK].
- ¹⁵ Moscovici alludes here to the "Histoire des mentalités" (History of mentalities), a body of historical scholarship that originated in France from the *Annales*, an

influential school of thought that dominated French historiography in the 20th century, and journal, of which Marc Bloch (1886–1944) was one of the founders with Lucien Febvre (1878–1956). This suggests that the use of the term “conspiracy mentality”, that he coined in his 1987 chapter, is rooted in historical scholarship. Translator’s note. [OK].

- ¹⁶ This comes from the second letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 2 (a part of the New Testament). Saint Paul warns his audience of the coming of the Antichrist, who poses as the Christ but is an incarnation of the power of Satan, to delude people into believing that the prophet has already arrived. By ‘man of anomie’, he means ‘outlaw’ (the term should therefore not be confused with the Durkheimian concept of anomie). Translator’s note. [OK].
- ¹⁷ The author writes here ‘leur anxiété indéfinissable’, which translates as ‘their undefinable anxiety’. We suspect this is an error and therefore wrote ‘the undefinable anxiety over them’. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ¹⁸ Norman Cohn (1915–2007) is a British historian who worked on genocide. In Cohn (1967/1996), he discusses the role of conspiracy theories in justifying the Holocaust. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ¹⁹ In the original, Moscovici starts the quote at “erudites, men of law”, which renders the quote relatively cryptic. We therefore chose to include a larger excerpt. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²⁰ The title translates as “*Of the Demon-mania of the Sorcerers*”. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²¹ Literally “The witches’ hammer”. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²² Edmund Burke (1729–1797), English politician and staunch opponent of the French Revolution. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²³ We believe Moscovici (or the person who typed his handwritten manuscript) made a typo here. Our own search suggests that such ‘societies of thought’ have been studied initially by historian Augustin Cochin (1876–1916), not ‘Collins’, a Catholic traditionalist hostile to democracy. Cochin argued that ‘alongside the real people, there was another group, which spoke and acted in its name – members of the societies of thought’ (Edelstein, 2014: 3). According to Cochin, this group manipulated voters in the 1789 election for the Estates General (that played a key role in the French Revolution). Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²⁴ Or ‘theme’. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²⁵ In relation to physics, anthropology, and sociology, Moscovici worked with a notion of *themata* as ontological presuppositions created and that remain preserved by society in the *longue durée* (long term). He drew on physics historian G. Holton’s term (1975, 1978): ‘By *themata* (from the Greek *thema* – that which is laid down by way of a proposition), I mean the often unconfessed or even unconscious basic presuppositions, preferences, and preconceptions that scientists may choose to adopt, even if not led to do so by the data or current theory’ (Holton, 1996: 201). Moscovici viewed *themata* as a driving force in his work on social representations (Moscovici, 1993: 4). In 1994,

in an article with philosopher and linguist Georges Vignaux, he suggested a conceptualization of *themata* as *archetypes*, a ‘framework of pre-existing thought’ (157) deeply rooted in society’s collective memory, likely as ‘systems of oppositions (i.e., terms which are contrasted in order to be related)’ (179), which ‘govern (...) discursive developments – and (...) certainly underlie most of our collective representations’ (167). He thought that social representations ‘always derive’ (ibid.) from those *primitive*, pseudo-conceptual kernel elements (‘source ideas’) (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994/2000, translated by G. Duveen). Translator’s note. [AGV].

- ²⁶ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) was a French social scientist and philosopher, and Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was a French philosopher. Lévy-Bruhl’s work was foundational in Moscovici’s conceptualization of social representations, and references to Bergson’s work were numerous in his later reflections. Translator’s note. [OK & AGV].
- ²⁷ The term ‘*mysterium tremendum*’ (terrifying mystery) was used by the German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1933) to describe an awe-inspiring religious emotion that he calls ‘*Numinous*’ (Otto, 1917/1923). The Latin word ‘*altum*’ refers to height or depth. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²⁸ ‘Be not high-minded but fear!’ This statement comes from Romans 11:20. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ²⁹ Roman writer and philosopher (4th century BC). This excerpt comes from ‘*Commentary on the dreams of Scipio*’ (Book one, Chapter 2, 18), in which Macrobius describes the ‘*Mysteries of Nature*’. We translated based on Moscovici’s wording, but Stahl (1990: 87) offers the following: ‘only eminent men of superior intelligence gain a revelation of her [Nature’s] truths; the others must satisfy their desire for worship with a ritual drama which prevents her secrets from becoming common’. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ³⁰ ‘*Mobile vulgus*’ translates as ‘the changeable common people’. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ³¹ The *Illuminati* (Enlightened) are an 18th century Bavarian society that sought to combat esoterism and superstition. Subsequently the term has been used by conservative and Christian authors especially to describe real and imaginary groups supposedly engaged in an international conspiracy aimed at promoting Enlightenment ideas. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ³² Although Moscovici cites Taguieff (2005) here, we couldn’t find this passage in this book. Translator’s note. [OK].
- ³³ ‘*Der Glaube an die Kausalität ist ein Aberglaube*’: ‘I didn’t mean to say that the belief in the causal nexus was one amongst superstitions but rather that superstition is nothing else than the belief in the causal nexus’ (Wittgenstein, 1973: 31). Translator’s note. [AGV].
- ³⁴ Why? Translator’s note. [AGV].
- ³⁵ What for? Translator’s note. [AGV].
- ³⁶ *Ur-phänomen*. Translator’s note. [AGV].
- ³⁷ Augustin Barruel (1741–1820), a French Catholic priest who put forward one of the first conspiracy the-

- ories: that the French Revolution was not the result of a popular uprising but the outcome of a bourgeois conspiracy long fomented by Jacobine 'clubs'. Translator's note. [OK].
- ³⁸ *'wie es eigentlich gewesen'*. Translator's note. [AGV].
- ³⁹ The Arcades Project (Benjamin, 2002) involves notes about Paris in the 19th century, compiled between 1927 and 1940 and published posthumously, in which philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) devoted special attention to the Parisian 'Arcades' or *Passages Couverts* full of shops that characterize the architecture of that time. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁰ Moscovici alludes here to the classic works by Adorno et al. (1950) on the Authoritarian Personality and to Rokeach's work on closed thinking (Rokeach, 1960) respectively. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴¹ The passage is accessible online (<https://tinyurl.com/y2jndk7h>) but without identifiable page numbers. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴² French historian (1910–1997) of antisemitism. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴³ Albert Bloch is a Jewish character in Proust's novel and Leopold Bloom, also a Jew, the main protagonist of Joyce's. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁴ This seems to be a quote from Pope John XXIII writing to his family about the Lateran Treaty (1929) between the Catholic Church and the (then-Fascist) Italian Kingdom. We couldn't find the French source Moscovici used for this letter, but the original source seems to be Giovanni XXIII (2000: 54–55). Translator's note. [OK, PR, J-L T].
- ⁴⁵ Claude-Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon is a French philosopher and economist (1760–1825), well-known for his work on the rise of industry in France. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), another French philosopher, originated and theorized positivism. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁶ What (is) always, what (is) everywhere, what (is) by everybody (believed). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁷ Louis-Gabriel de Bonald (1754–1840) is a Catholic French politician and philosopher who espoused Monarchism and was a fervent opponent of the French Revolution. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁸ French medieval poet (12th century). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁴⁹ This excerpt seems to come from *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (1181: 363b) as found on the electronic dictionary of Chrétien de Troyes (<http://www.atilf.fr/dect/>), although we could not find the exact same wording as in Moscovici's original French version (which was adapted from Chrétien's Ancient French). Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁵⁰ A series of show trials instigated by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s to eliminate his political rivals, who were often accused of conspiracies. Translator's note. [OK].
- ⁵¹ Moscovici classified social representations in three categories: hegemonical, emancipated, and polemical. Polemical social representations emerge from an opposition between social groups and are mutually exclusive. For example, Marxism is the focus of such a representation (i.e., viewed as 'liberating' for some and as 'oppressing' for others). See Moscovici (1988). Translator's note. [OK].

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supp. File 1.** The original lecture notes, in French, from which this paper has been translated. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.432.s1>

Competing Interests

Given its posthumous nature, the author could not declare whether competing interests existed. The editors of the journal are not aware of any competing interests.

Peer Review

Given its posthumous nature, this paper has not been peer-reviewed.

References

- Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brenswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N.** (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper and Rowe.
- Bauman, Z.** (1987). *Legislators and interpreters: On modernity, post-modernity and intellectuals*. New York: Wiley.
- Benjamin, W.** (2002). *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Bodin, J.** (2016 [1580]). *De la démonomanie des sorciers*. [Of the demomania of sorcerers]. Geneva, Switzerland: Vrin.
- Bloch, M.** (1983 [1924]). *Les rois thaumaturges*. [The thaumaturge kings]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Boucheron, P.** (2017). *Chaque époque rêve la suivante: Histoire des pouvoirs en Europe occidentale, XIII^e–XVI^e siècle*. [Each era dreams of the following: History of the powers in Western Europe, 13th–16th Century]. Paris: Collège de France. Lecture retrieved from <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/patrick-boucheron/course-2017-01-10-11h00.htm>.
- Bronner, S. E.** (2003). *A rumor about the Jews: Reflections on antisemitism and the protocols of the learned elders of Zion*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, D.** (2003). *The Da Vinci code*. New York: DoubleDay.
- Cohn, N.** (1996). *Warrant for genocide. The myth of the Jewish world-conspiracy and the protocols of the elders of Zion*. Londres: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- de Bonald, L.** (1845). *Oeuvres de M. de Bonald* (T. 1). [Mr. de Bonald's work]. Brussels, Belgium: Société Nationale.
- Durkheim, E.** (1951 [1897]). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (G. Simpson, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Edelstein, M.** (2014). *The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Ginzburg, C.** (1976). High and low: The theme of forbidden knowledge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Past & Present*, 73, 28–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/73.1.28>
- Giovanni XXIII.** (2000). *Vita di un Padre Santo, Andrea Torielli*. Milan, Italy.

- Graumann, C. F., & Moscovici, S.** (1987). *Changing conceptions of conspiracy*. New York: Springer. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4618-3>
- Himmler, H.** (1978). *Discours secrets*. [Secret speeches]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Holton, G.** (1975). On the role of themata in scientific thought. *Science*, 188(4186), 328–334. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.188.4186.328>
- Holton, G.** (1978). *The scientific imagination: Case studies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Holton, G.** (1996). On the art of scientific imagination. *Daedalus*, 125(2), 183–208.
- Jacques-Chaquin, N.** (1987). Demonic Conspiracy. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (pp. 71–85). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4618-3_4
- Jankélévitch, V.** (1959/2015 [1957]). *Henri Bergson* (N. F. Schott Transl.). Durham & London, UK: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375333>
- Moore, R. I.** (1987). *The formation of a persecuting society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Moscovici, S.** (1987). The conspiracy mentality. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici, *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 151–169). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4618-3_9
- Moscovici, S.** (1988). Notes towards a description of social representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18(3), 211–250. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420180303>
- Moscovici, S.** (1993). Introductory address to the International Conference on Social Representations, Ravello, 1992. *Papers on Social Representations*, 2, 160–170.
- Moscovici, S., & Vignaux, G.** (1994/2000). Le concept de Thémata. [The Thémata concept]. In C. Guimelli (Ed.), *Structures et transformations des représentations sociales* [Structures and transformations of social representations] (pp. 25–72), Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Otto, R.** (1923 [1917]). *The idea of the holy* (J. W. Harvey Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Popper, K.** (2002). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge* (2nd edition). New York: Routledge.

How to cite this article: Moscovici, S. (2020). Reflections on the Popularity of 'Conspiracy Mentalities'. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 33(1): 9, 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.432>

Submitted: 14 April 2020

Accepted: 14 April 2020

Published: 01 June 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*International Review of Social Psychology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 

- Rokeach, M.** (1960). *The open and closed mind: Investigations into the nature of belief systems and personality systems*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rollin, H.** (2000). *Une mystification mondiale* [A global mystification]. Paris: Allia.
- Roth, Ph.** (2004). *The plot against America*. New York: Random House.
- Simmel, G.** (1906). The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies. *American Journal of Sociology*, 11(4), 441–498. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/211418>
- Stahl, W. H.** (1990). *Commentary on the dreams of Scipio by Macrobius*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Strauss, L.** (1952). *Persecution and the art of writing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Taguieff, P.-A.** (2004). *Les Protocoles des sages de Sion: Faux et usages d'un faux*. Paris: Fayard.
- Taguieff, P.-A.** (2005). *La Foire aux Illuminés*. [The fair of the Enlightened]. Paris: Mille et Une Nuits.
- Trotsky, L.** (1950). *La révolution russe* [The Russian Revolution]. Paris: Seuil.
- Vahinger, L.** (1924 [1911]). *The philosophy of 'as if': A system of the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind* (C. K. Ogden Transl.). Fakenham, UK: Cox & Wyman, Ltd.
- Wittgenstein, L.** (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Wittgenstein, L.** (1973). *Letters to C.K. Ogden*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zukier, H.** (1987). The conspiratorial imperative: Medieval Jewry in Western Europe. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 86–103). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4618-3_9