5.2
CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

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Introduction

Though the coniuratio was one of the most essential patterns of European medieval constitutional realities, one might argue that there were no fully fleshed conspiracy theories until the Renaissance. Indeed, the coniuratio, the Latin term for the making of reciprocal oaths, was the founding act of communities and medieval cities by which a not yet formally integrated social group was forged into a legally constituted corporation; a city, basically, was nothing more than the coniuratio of its citizens (Oexle 1985; Bader, Dilcher 1999: 366–87). As coniurare – i.e. conjuring – was pointing to the socially binding power between people with common goals before any constituted commonwealth, coniurationes are found in many other medieval contexts and particularly within then constituted cities; people could even go back to that original form of establishing social binding as a means to oppose the constituted institutions. In fact, parts of the population could separate themselves from the rest or from the elite and even conjure against each other, forming conjurations in competition for power behind the same city walls. The fazioni and congiure of late medieval Italian city states were in the end nothing more than this reciprocal enactment of the founding principle of cities within and against the city itself (Guidi 1992; Villard 2008). The emergence of modern conspiracism was an urban phenomenon intrinsically linked, from the beginning, with germs of local forms of a public sphere (fama, rumore) and was certainly the medieval seedbed for the modern conception of conspiracy theory (Crouzet-Pavan 1997: 223–55). This double-bind semantics of coniuratio was mirrored by the same positive and negative double semantics of the conspiratio: in Ciceronian language, ‘being of one mind or spirit’ could imply the ‘con-spiratio’ between two or several philosophical friends.

However, in medieval times, conspiratio as a term was used far less than coniuratio. This is not of great importance as long as both words were used as vaguely synonymous, but it might be an indicator for what could be called the spiritualisation of the conjurator practice and the emergence of conspiracy theories as a distinct phenomenon in early modern times. This later conception of conspiracy refers to:

a narrative of a possible past and present, often also containing elements of future predictions, claiming to be the true representation of the past and present which is built from some commonly accepted elements (‘facts’, sequential and causal relationships)
and some elements that are not proven but possible and that bridge the gaps of knowledge and understanding concerning a certain event or a sequence of events. The possibility of the formative elements of the narrative depends on the character of the representation of reality in the given society and the form of distinction between fiction and factuality accessible in that time and that society. The not-proven elements of the conspiracy narrative are mostly adapted to the convictions of a given community of values. A conspiracy theory mostly has an explanatory, an appellative-affective and a denunciation function.

(Zwierlein 2013: 72–3)

As ‘a narrative’, I do not mean two lines in a letter or the rendering of a rumour that was orally communicated, but a longer and more or less carefully, consciously and purposefully crafted text that was circulating independently within a given communication context, such as decision-making circles of early modern governments or several public sphere(s). According to this perspective, medieval Europe was full of coniurationes in the above-defined sense, while conspiracy theories could be detected only very seldomly, and in embryonic form.

Conspiracy theories during the Middle Ages

Yet, the current state of research on antisemitic, anti-‘heretical’, anti-sorcery and anti-Muslim beliefs, movements and violence like pogroms, massacres and other forms of persecution suggests, to some extent, the existence of structured conspiracy theories during the Iberian convivencia (Nirenberg 1996; Catlos 2004) with the persecution of Hussites (Šmahel 2002; Oberste 2003) or during the Crusades (Jaspert 2014). For instance, studies on the complex situation of convivencia between Jews, Muslims and Christians in the medieval Iberian Peninsula have drawn attention to many instances of domestic mass violence among those factions, mostly of Christians against Jews. Many studies have been done on the persecution of Jews throughout Europe, specifically preceding and during the crises of plague epidemics. Research on the anti-Jewish persecutions in France in 1320–1321 have understood them as exploiting pre-existing tensions in the service of a royal scheme to seize property (Brody 1974: 92–3; Ginzburg 1991: 49–50). Nirenberg has made the point that one should not understand these accusations as ‘the panic of irrational masses, nor [as] a closely planned conspiracy coordinated by some unidentifiable elites, but [as] the formulation and widespread adoption of a rhetoric that momentarily “worked”’ (Nirenberg 2015: 122). Nirenberg demonstrated that, in the kingdom of Aragon in this period, ‘although the form and vocabulary of stereotypes about and accusations against minorities (poison, magic, sexuality, and so forth)’ were also to be found there, there is no evidence of belief in large conspiracy ‘theories’ or plots; the outbreak of – partially conscious and organised – violence has to be understood as the enactment of ‘doing and stimulating cruelty with words’ (124). It was common to interpret the world through stereotypes that employed ‘conspiracy’ thoughts and practices. Many similar stereotypes and beliefs found in chronicles and homiletic works have been analysed by Heil as illustrative of an all-encompassing idea of a Jewish world conspiracy. In the late thirteenth century, Richer of Sens wrote in the Gesta Senoniensis Ecclesiae that ‘in the whole world the Jews commit serious crimes’, claiming that these plans were constantly elaborated and cultivated ‘in their heart’, aiming, ultimately, for the ruin of Christianity (Heil 2006, 209). However, those ‘germs’ of conspiracy theories rarely transcended the text that described them to a larger narrative.

Things seemed to change during the late-Middle Ages. By the end of the fifteenth century, larger narratives appeared, like the ‘Vengeance of Our Savior’ stories (Nirenberg 2015; Heil
This evolution fits with the general assumption that fully-fledged conspiracy theories only emerged in tandem with the new print culture and modes of communication around 1500. The papacy in Avignon and the Great Schism of 1376 triggered a pluralisation and multiplication of manuscript communication and quick exchange and diffusion of ideas. One could see a conspiratorial character in the early example of the use of a historical argument against the papacy, which can be found in Marsilius’ *Defensor pacis* (II: 25) (Marsilius 1958 [1324]: 846–83) in which the whole of ecclesiastical history after late antiquity was interpreted as a tyrannical usurpation of the Church by the papacy. The motive of the *papa haereticus* (‘heretical pope’), already considered a problem by the canon lawyers and scholarly commentators (Tierney 1998), was turned here into a historical narrative with an explanatory power. However, the aim of Marsilius in writing his tract was to render a true historical account, albeit one which might have not been shared by his opponents. In the early modern period, there was no clear distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘factuality’, and Marsilius’ narrative was not conceived in a specific metaphysical framework governed by these terms (leaving aside the fact that every ecclesiastical historical narrative in Europe – at least before 1700 – was conceived ‘metaphysically’ within the framework of biblical time and Jewish–Christian teleology). In this regard, not every work of rhetoric, tendentious explanatory scheme or rendering of history should be categorised as a potential ‘conspiracy narrative’. Research on conciliarism, for example, has never insisted on the existence of fully-fledged conspiracy theories as a major element of conciliarist communication in the context of the Councils of Constance or Basel.

Sorcery and magic in late medieval times, particularly in the fifteenth century, have also been analysed as forerunners of modern conspiracism. Behringer has shown how sorcery and witch stereotypes could be transferred from one ‘minority’ to the other, in his case to the Waldensian heterodox community (Behringer 2004). Political conspiracies that made use of sorcery stereotypes are part of the late medieval imaginary: The accusation or mere idea that there were plans to murder popes and kings by way of magic and forms of magical poison, spells or similar means are spread through the chronicles and epistolary sources of the Wars of the Roses. The use of ‘image-magic’ as part of real plots of murdering governing princes and kings was referred to during inquisition processes or secular trials of the *crimen laesae maiestatis* type; this adds a metaphysical element to the usual schemes of plotting and the rumours about them in late-medieval court societies. Despite this, the role of conspiracy theories as a means of explaining the larger plot was kept to a minimum (Jones 1972).

Crusader sermons and similar texts would only partially fit the above definition of conspiracy theories; there was indeed no need for a construction of such explanatory narratives as the theological positions about the heretical and enemy quality of the persecuted were settled (positively or negatively). And the most extensive recent studies on the late medieval Italian *congiure, lotte* and *fazioni* that reconstruct many real plots and conjuring events, murders, overthrow or transfer of power in the cities, and quote and relate ‘rumors’ that were spreading, hardly mention one central clear-cut conspiracy narrative that would have circulated and that would have had its own causal agency (Villard 2008; Bowd 2018).

**The notion of conspiracy in the early modern age**

Machiavelli analysed the political conditions and functions of conspiracies in several works, including the biography of Castruccio Castracani and, most notably, in the famous chapter six of Book III in the *Discourses on Livy* (‘On conspiracies’). But, he neither crafted a conspiracy theory himself nor analysed a consistent text, ideology or concept as major driving force or causal element, but instead examined the power relationship through the characters and deeds
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of the men involved. Though his method of political analysis was very new, with his use of congiure he still referred to the medieval realities, using it only in its negative meaning within already constituted commonwealths. His reasoning – referring obviously to Tacitus and Livy (on Piso and other Roman conspiracies) – was already informed by the Humanist revival of ancient Greek and Roman concepts. Explicitly referring to congiure against the ‘fatherland [patria]’ of a city-republic and a prince in his territory, he aligned the notion of conspiracy to political action – as preparations or enactments of regicides, tyrannicides or revolts – punished in legal terms as crimen laesae maiestatis (Machiavelli 1997 [1499–1512]; Fasano Guarini 1996).

Conspiracy/conjuration and its legal response as crime de lèse majesté evolved together in medieval and modern times. The respective laws of the Codex Iustiniani (Cod. IX; 8: 5, which was taken from Cod. Theod. IX, 14, 3) had always been known during the Middle Ages, and when the Digests from the eleventh century in Bologna (with the central lex julia majestatis, fragments of which are in Dig. 48, 4, 1, 1) were revisited, the academic legal commentary tradition also started to address the crimen laesae maiestatis. The Codex text was applied to the medieval Holy Roman Emperor by Charles IV and the collective of the electors as an amendment to the Golden Bull in the Metz laws of 25 December 1356. The electors were then included into the protection provided by the lèse-majesté laws that had been, in antiquity, the core of the ancient Roman emperor’s familia and the members of his ‘consilium et consistorium’ (Fritz 1932: 80–2), even if the term ‘conjuratio’, though existing, was not prominent in Roman legal terminology. The reception of the Roman law and this adaptation to the present political realities by including the electors shows how crimes against superiors, attempts of assassination and conjuring evidently were perceived, again, to be an urgent threat and problem.

However, while the problem of conjurations against the life of reigning princes or the emperor were present from the normative point of view of prohibition and punishment, actual conspiracy theory narratives were not existing or have not survived. Proliferation and pluralisation of such forms, sometimes hard to distinguish from ‘rebellion’, ‘revolt’ and ‘sedition’, which would have had a different sedes materiae in legal terms, were taking place. Machiavelli questioned how to ‘cope’ with them in political, not legal terms – but the old notion of the con-juratio as the even positive founding moment of a community did not form part of this reasoning.

The historical conditions for the emergence of real conspiracy theories

Real early modern conspiracy theories seemed to emerge only when three historical conditions – intrinsically connected – were in place: a) The establishment of a stable information public sphere of political news in anonymous form, independent from only one or the other ambassadorial networks. b) The change on the epistemic level of how politics was perceived and made: Quattrocento Italian men of politics in city-republics and princely courts were constantly relying on and became independent from the information feed as a representation of the political present state and as the starting point for secular forms of prognostics and calculations. c) The stabilisation and at the same time pluralisation of the post-Reformation confessional schisms, forming extremely consistent boundaries between we-groups and ‘enemies’ from the micro-levels of the villages to European state politics.

The reason why, after around 1560, we do find, even on a European scale, conspiracy theories with an ‘autonomous actor status’ as defined above is probably not to be found in the first instance in a new form of political habitus. In fact, medieval men of politics were probably as ‘wicked’, ‘prudent’ or even ‘Machiavellian’ as Richelieu and Mazarin, and this claim can be transferred to the micro-levels of society. The reason is not to be found mainly on the internal side of literary discourse, its genres and the development of contents (though both are co-evolving at the same
time). The decisive difference — visible in every state archive from 1450 onwards in Italy and later in the other European countries — was on the side of the media, of news communication and the empowerment of individual anonymous authors as participants. Those could be princes like Lorenzo de’ Medici, agents, ambassadors, secretaries like Machiavelli or his collaborator Biagio Buonaccorsi and hundreds of similar office holders, familiari, courtiers, clients of princes and cardinals and, finally, the writers of self-made newsletters (e.g. avvisatori, menanti, novellanti in Italy, which appeared decades later north of the Alps, mostly thanks to linking news communication to print). Producing as well as receiving the steady flow of political representation, they created a constantly changing sphere of the present, ‘the contemporaneity’ as a textual universe, which became independent from a single communicator, even from the princes themselves.

In comparison, despite the communication of a large quantity of manuscripts (codices), the late medieval ‘public sphere’ remained more local, even in conciliarist periods, eventually becoming multi-local and then connected (e.g. Avignon – Constance – Basel). It was also more oral, far more dependent on individual bilateral communication, and less triggered by the continuity and steady (weekly or higher) frequency of communication relying on postal networks. Far from being only the other side of an early modern, well-developed concept of authorship and a by-product of censorship, anonymity emerged far earlier due to the separation of universal and common news that should and could be available for all from the secret ones. It was this anonymous communication — in which sender and receiver were unimportant — that created ‘the present reality’.

It is when the present state of affairs became somehow an anonymous ‘unit’ to which one could ‘connect’, that one could perceive, ask for or even buy on the avvisi market, that conspiracy theories could be a second-degree genre, a parasite medium linked to and emulating the already established form of political explanation and analysis, of future plans and projects. Print added to this a different medium, but historically the first steady news communication as described above emerged beyond print and even remained for centuries in Italy a manuscript form. In contrast, in Northern Europe, the media situation effectively ‘jumped’ from parchment to print before having really explored and exhausted all possibilities of mass manuscript communication as in Italy (Zwierlein 2006: 557–610, 2013).

That is why conspiracy theory texts were not necessarily communicated in print: We find texts of European-wide conspiracy theories in manuscript form in the archives of the smaller Catholic or Calvinist princes of Germany’s territories as well as in London, France or the Netherlands, and later in Bohemia. They were mixed up with the letters, papers and newsletters (often in bundles of ‘Newe Zeytungen’ or ‘Newes’) that served the councillors and princes with information about movements of mercenary troops or events in foreign courts.

Evidently, there were also plots and attempts to kill princes, queens and kings, many of them in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The list of attempts against the life of Elizabeth I is long: William of Orange was murdered in 1584, Henri III of France in 1589; Henri de Navarre, the leading Protestant prince of France and then first Bourbon king, Henri IV, escaped many attempts on his life before finally been killed in 1610.

However, the distinct element of early modern communication was that conspiracy theories had now become agents of their own account in actor-text relationships; transferring the concepts about actor-thing relationships to our context, those texts, once produced and in circulation, had a certain autonomy of agency and influence because of this newly emerged communication context. In other words, they emerged from real plot situations, they influenced these situations and eventually they produced the fear of plots. An example were the many stories about a large alliance of Catholic powers (mainly the French and the Spanish kings) that began in 1565 as a detailed fictitious narrative (Kluckhohn 1869; Boutier et al. 1984: 87–92;
Zwierlein 2006: 653–64, 2013: 82–8). This alliance, as far as we know today, never existed, at least not with any clear ‘grand design’. Yet, many singular discorsi/discours and serious attempts to build trans-regional alliances were circulating and were evidently part of confessional politics: Conspiracy theories worked as the parasite of other narratives of possible present states explaining past events and reaching into the future.

The impact of religion on the shaping of conspiracy theories

Law and legal thought and practice are a realm of quite slow development, but the difference between the medieval and early modern periods is visible within the doctrine of the crimen laesae maiestatis. The constant communication about plotting and its many forms – evidently with examples of real actions like troops, gatherings, fortifications and occupations of parts of France, like during the Biron conspiracy of 1601 – was becoming a problem. The traditional medieval understanding of the crime was that no one could be punished just for a mere idea (‘Cogitationis poenam nemo patitur’ ['Just for a thought, no one can be punished']). Though it was formulated for civil, not criminal law, medieval lawyers usually adopted this position for capital crimes. But, around 1600, lawyers started ‘spiritualising’ the crime, agreeing that not only such actions, but also a serious plan of revolt or regicide, clearly formulated and worked out, was enough to be punished, Dig. 48, 19, 18. Biron was executed for the crime of conjuring, though nothing real had happened – at least less than in the Essex affair or the Gunpowder plot in England shortly after. One can understand this as the reaction of the legal system to that new autonomous role of conspiracy theories and plotting practices as agents and elements of the political communication.

However, no conspiracy theories or narratives about another group that would aim for world hegemony in a secular sense emerged or, at least, were important or successful. Admittedly, the monarchia universalis that Charles V was perhaps really aiming for and that his son, Philip II, and his successors were still blamed and feared for was the subject of several Protestant anti-Spanish narratives.

In this confessional period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during which religion shaped thought and representation, a religious-metaphysical dimension was often added to the plot narrative. In Protestant Northern Europe, pamphlets and Flugschriften transmitted conspiracy theories about (half-real, half completely fictitious) pan-European Catholic alliances and plans to subjugate Protestantism. They contained images and frontispieces depicting the three-headed Antichrist, and the Antichrist narrative always served as a framework, sometimes just loosely alluded to with one word or a line, sometimes in a more elaborate form by blending the apocalyptic Biblical texts of Daniel and John with the present political actors. Jesuit Nicolas Sander reacted as early as 1571 to that Protestant conceptual framework by writing a whole folio volume against the different Protestant theological identifications of the Pope with the Antichrist and Rome as his seat.

This religious dimension explains the particular role of anti-Jesuitism. As the most active and newly found Counter-Reformation order (McCoog 1996, 2012), the Society of Jesus stood in every pamphlet as part of the Antichrist’s rotten crowd (Lake, Questier 2002; Houlston 2007; Doran, Kewes 2014; Zwierlein 2018: 42). In this respect, among the most infamous is the Monita privata Societatis Jesu, published in Cracovia in 1614 and immediately put on the index of prohibited books. The text is an alleged code of conduct for Jesuits, describing how they should behave when they enter a new city, how they should gain the favour of Christian and Ottoman princes, how they should gain influence over the princes as their confessors, and how they should exercise power by indicating those to be nominated for state offices (Pavone 2000: 274). First translated into Italian and printed only in 1667–1671, the text would go on to have great
success in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during the Jansenist and anti-Jesuitist struggles, and preparing the way for nineteenth-century forms of anti-Jesuitism (Cubitt 1993).

Although a sophisticated forgery, it was not as far from real secret Counter-Reformation plans as one might think. The reception of Giovanni Botero’s *Reason of State* could have led to politico-confessional reasoning at the Curia about the opportunities and occasions for regaining ground against Protestantism, as well as against Islam and schismatic aberrations. *Discorsi* (i.e. plans, projects) communicated within the Roman Curia could have a similar ‘reason-of-Church’ form. To approach a member of a Protestant family with the goal of reconversion, to collect money in order to bribe Ottomans to provide a *berat* for a Catholic instead of a schismatic Patriarch and even to write, print and diffuse Arabic texts purporting to be by and for Muslims but introducing Catholic catechetical principles were all tactics considered and put into practice since at least the time of Gregory XIII (Zwierlein 2007). While Catholic theoreticians were still fighting ‘Machiavellism’ as political content, their political language and method of Counter-Reformation might owe a debt to common Renaissance roots that Machiavelli had perfected. The forged *Monita* used these narrative strategies as parasites of existing genres, remaining and seeming possible despite, eventually, not being absolutely real.

The decline of conspiracy theories in the European state system

During the seventeenth century, conspiracism as well as plotting was on the wane, at least in some regions of Europe (Dekker 1996: 580). However, Britain and its empire remained a stronghold for ongoing religious conspiracism, commonly referred to in the sources as ‘anti-popyery’ and ‘anti-Puritanism’ (Lake 1989, 2006). This could manifest itself in a wide range of beliefs, from the simple conviction that Catholics were the enemy to fully-fleshed narratives and inventions as defined above.

Around 1600, in the Tudor/Stuart succession crisis, government circles were continually suspicious about Jesuit and popish ‘plotting’. A recent study summarised these pamphlets as ‘the standard, Cecilian popish conspiracy theory, centred on the alliance between the pope and Spain’ (Lake, Questier 2018: 23). Pamphlets like Oates’s own *A True Narrative; The Discovery of the Popish Plot* (1679) and *A True Narrative of the Horrid Hellish Popish Plot* (1682) as well as Robert L’Estrange’s and dozens of other pamphlets of the late 1670s and the early 1680s continued to repeat the alleged ‘grand design’ of continental Catholicism, adapting the ‘highly malleable ideology’ of anti-popyery to every current situation in a very precise manner (Knights 1994, 2005; Hinds 2010; Morton 2016: 422, 427).

Anti-Jacobitism and anti-popyery would remain major discursive forces throughout the eighteenth century (Donovan 1987; Haydon 1994). The perceptions of the Gordon Riots of 1780 were predominantly framed like this (Haydon 2004), even across the British Empire and the Atlantic world (Jones 2013), in which anti-Catholicism intersected with xenophobia (Rabin 2017; Wein 2018: 31–65). Arguably, in the British case, nineteenth-century anti-Catholic discourse across the ‘second’ British Empire had more in common with its early modern antecedents (Burstein 2017) than was the case between early modern and neo-confessionalised nineteenth-century antagonisms on the Continent, particularly in France (Cubitt 1993) and Germany. However, we must recall in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France the flourishing of anti-Jansenist conspiracy theories next to the anti-Jesuit ones since the *Lettre circulaire de Port-Royal* and the *Projet de Bourg-Fontaine* (Ceyssens 1975).

Those cases and traditions of conspiracist discourses put aside, it seems, that with the early eighteenth century, a period of low frequency and conjuncture of conspiracy communication was starting. The European state system in its pre- and post-1756 settlement was far less prone
to the circulation and influence of conspiracy theories with a religious-metaphysical bias. Research has certainly reminded several ‘real’ conjurations, often of nobles such as the three 1674 conjurations against Louis XIV or the insurrection of Hungary’s magnates of 1664–1671 (Bérenger 1996; O’Connor 1996), but these real projects of conspiracies were not necessarily part of the conspiracy communication. The political language of a Colbert (Soll 2009), a Mau-repas (Zwieierlin 2016: 51–72) or a Choiseul, a Kaunitz (Schilling 1994) or a Pombal (Maxwell 1995) – just to quote some important first ministers – was usually far from being dictated by conspiracism. This is in great contrast to the discourse of Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, of a Cath-
olic prince like Carlo Emanuele of Savoy, of the Cardinal William Allen or of some of the popes themselves around 1600.

Conspiracy theories during the Enlightenment

A major change was at work in the second part of the eighteenth century. Public and ideological discourse, but also the culture of enlightened sociability right up to the proliferation of secret societies, became more detached from the sphere of political decision-making, despite the continuity of evolving reciprocal referencing and (often somehow dialectical) relationships. Large parts of enlightened sociability were no forum for conspiracism. Visitors to Paris salons partially overlapped with the network of foreign politics and spies, but, as far as we know, the discussions in the salons themselves usually remained less concentrated on politics and confessional debates (Lilti 2005).

Only the smaller part of enlightened sociability, the secret societies or Freemasonry and its offsprings, might be related to conspiracism. Obviously, as for real noble revolts of the seventeenth century, the proliferation and spread of (the usually politically very innocent) Freemasonry and real secret societies (Beaurepaire 1998; Zaunstöck 1999; Cazzaniga 2006; Porset, Révauger 2013; Gerlach 2014; Péter 2016) must be distinguished from the conspiracist discourse interpreting them as purportedly important agents working covertly for some unknown dreadful purpose or revolution (Cazzaniga 2006: 22–7; 185–92; 312–30). Kant had noted that secret societies were the product of a state that had not yet given its citizens the liberty that they deserved by nature, and therefore those circles were embryonic niches of liberty. This has parallels with how the development towards bourgeois society is constructed: Freemasonry and other secret societies were usually only ‘political’ in transcending the borders between estates concerning membership, though the content of what was discussed in the meetings was usually moral philosophy or other non-political issues.

Weishaupt’s Illuminati were an exception, as the manuscript plans found with him when he was imprisoned betray a philosophico-historical progressivist attempt to alter society – or rather, humankind, the Menschengeschlecht – into some form of egalitarian, non-monarchical eudai-
monist commonwealth. His method was to peacefully install members of the order in all gov-

The French Revolution and revolutionary wars made this project both obsolete and more suspect (as proved by the renewed Bavarian anti-Illuminati edict of 1791), and contributed to the myth of its continued, hidden existence (Gregory 2009: 393–411). More important is that, as with the evolution of Freemasonry during the late eighteenth century, the Illuminati’s hier-
archical revelation of secrets within the different provinces and lodges led to the content of the secret(s) becoming a matter of public discourse (McKenzie-McHarg 2016).

However, the suspicion that some hidden unknown superiors or eminences grises were manip-
ulating society and politics predated late eighteenth-century Freemasonry; one such example
can be found as early as 1710 within the discourse criticising party politics. Henry Sacheverell, Benjamin Hoadly and Simon Clement argued that behind the Tories, Court Tories, Whigs and Country Whigs, there were ‘designing men’ exploiting the dysfunctional powers of factionalism and opposition to paralyse civil libertarian society and to pursue selfish goals (Knights 2004: 160–8).

In the end, despite all forms of genuinely clandestine radical Enlightenment communication and exchange of thought, such as regarding forms of atheism (Cavaillé 2002; Mulsow 2018), the ascription of conspiratorial and seriously destructive power to ‘philosophers’ and secret societies happened mostly later in the century, combining those hidden forces with elements similar to the condemnation of factionalism and plotting behind visible party politics at the beginning of the century. That is why, in France, this could emerge only during the French Revolution, as before then there was no possibility for ‘party’ politics. Most famous for these developments are Barruel, Robinson and Starcke, who all published their major works in the 1790s (Schaeper-Wimmer 1985; Perronet 1990; Bianchini 1999; Reinalter 2004; Waterman 2005; Cazzaniga 2006, 312–30; Oberhauser 2013).

Conspiracy theories as a tenet of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary thought

It would be too simple to characterise the conspiracy theories of the Enlightenment in contrast to those of the times of confessional antagonism as merely the secularisation of the latter, because there was still a religious dimension in Weishaupt’s teleological concepts of the formation of a perfect society (Illuminati) or in French revolutionary conspiracism. Certainly, the secular form of conspiracy theories was, even in revolutionary times, to some extent a continuation of the steady repeated communication of the Renaissance and the emergence of the European state system. Revolutionary fears about a pan-European conspiracy, about the enemies outside of France, such as the Bourbon princes and nobles exiled to an allegedly mighty ‘Coblentz’ (Henke 2000), and about the enemies inside, such as the royalists in the Vendée, were fabricated as narratives, just as they had been 200 years before.

However, during the former confessional age, apocalyptical or similar confessionally antagonistic interpretations gave an overall framework to such narratives; this was replaced in revolutionary times, roughly speaking, with the vague philosophic-historical concept that each threat, each step, and all conspiracies were part of the larger struggle between the achievement of the new society and the Old Regime. The battleground was therefore an imagined humankind’s timeline of destiny, achieving either to take the step forward toward a new *epoché* or to fall back into barbarism. According to Koselleck, this conception of history is part of a succession of competing teleological utopian social self-understandings that started in the late Enlightenment and went on until the Cold War (Koselleck 1959). For Furet, French revolutionary conspiracism was an unfolding of the binary thought of Rousseau, radicalised foremost by Robespierre (Furet 1981; Cubitt 1999; Leuwers 2016: 309–29). In all his major speeches, Robespierre employed a rhetoric of antagonism between liberty and tyranny: ‘Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all the friends of tyranny conspire’ (Robespierre 1967 [1793–1794]: 353–6). This antagonism also related to the confrontation between the friends of the revolution, and the enemies both internal and external, between the gouvernement populaire and the gouvernement despotique, between a normal state of society and a revolutionary state of emergency that even required terror as a legitimate instrument of bourgeois politics.

The self-understanding of the revolutionaries resulted in the quick succession of emerging antagonisms within and outside of the National Assembly and Convention from 1792 to 1794.
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(Tackett 2000; Campbell et al. 2007) This antagonism was conceived through the prism of ancient patterns: Robespierre compared the ‘conspirations contre la République’ with the Catiline conspiracy (Robespierre 1967 [1793–1794]: 358). The abstract form of those antagonisms (Girondins against Montagnards, both competing for the control of the majority of the moderate so-called plaine) has indeed similarities with the old pattern of a city-republic suddenly eroding and being deconstructed into competing factions – this struggle somehow representing the drift of French revolutionary politics as a whole.

Conspiracy patterns were similarly shaped on the side of the counterrevolutionaries. For Edmund Burke, the royalists or Barruel, the Revolution itself threatened to drag humankind back into forms of barbarism (Pestel 2015). From this perspective, Englishmen could compare to the chaos in France their good, and allegedly peaceful, ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 as the morally successful example of establishing a civilised commonwealth. In Europe, fears were of conspiracies that tacitly or consciously opposed the old European hierarchical society with a new yet-to-be-created egalitarian bourgeois society. But, outside of Europe, in the colonies, conspiracism and fear of revolts were usually framed within the divisions of the stratified society of colonisers and colonised. During the Saint-Domingue/Haiti Revolution, revolutionaries could be both pro-colonial and defend at the same time the execution of Louis XVI, while anti-revolutionary exiles could opt against slavery. As a consequence, although they may have started on common ground, discourses and fears of conspiracies could become very multifaceted (Knight 2000; Geggus 2000: 149–70; Girard 2005; Sharples 2015; Dillon, Drexler 2016; Pope 2017).

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories in a narrower definition are an early modern ‘invention’ or a phenomenon only emerging after the Renaissance, during the confessional age. Two major types of conspiracy theories were evolving at this time: Those with a confessional, eventually apocalyptic framework from the 1560s to the eighteenth century that were based on anti-popery, anti-Puritanism, anti-Jansenism and so on; and those conspiracy theories informed by the new Enlightenment secret societies and social transformations that were first only imagined in utopian forms. These deep changes in society were then realised during the age of revolutions, with the reiteration and pluralisation of friend-enemy oppositions and antagonisms along the framing social and philosophic-historical divisions between an Old and a New Order. The older confessional and the new Enlightenment type of conspiracy theories merged with each other, using similar vocabulary and stereotypes. All those early modern conspiracy theories, finally, fed upon other factual types of future-oriented narratives – plans, projects and causal analysis of past events for reasons of taming the future (Bode, Dietrich 2013) – that had emerged with the evolution of modern anonymous news communication and the visibility of participants within the political public sphere.

References


Middle Ages and early modern period


