

# A Functionalist Analysis of Conspiracy Theories:

## *Conspiracy Theories and their Social Functions*

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This research note aims to consider conspiracy theories (CTs) through a functionalist analysis. I argue that CTs mainly fulfil seven – social – functions. Most of them (4 out of 7) are intentionally and consciously developed by social actors who support CTs. Robert K. Merton called them *manifest* functions (1968: 73-138). Quite the opposite, *latent* functions, 3 out of 7, are unconscious, unintended but beneficial. Put another way, manifest functions are the consequences that people observe or expect. They are explicitly stated and understood by the participants in the relevant action whereas latent functions are unexpected in their developments, goals and results. On the one hand, manifest functions are: 1°) A function of explanation and simplification of the historical process; 2°) A function of reification of the social process; 3°) A function of mobilization; 4°) A function of politicization and legitimization. On the other hand, latent functions are: 1°) A function of paradoxical rationalization; 2°) *Tribunitienne* function (Lavau 1981: 342)<sup>2</sup>; 3°) Symbolic function.

CTs or conspiracism try to unveil the hidden truth or the hidden hand. Everything that happens in the world is the result of a secret plot orchestrated by evil elites (Campion-Vincent 2005). Fenster (2008: 1) stresses that CTs express “the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof, circulates solely on the margins of society”. Regarding this definition, it appears clearly that CTs fulfil first a function of *explanation and simplification* of the historical process: “All is linked. Nothing happens accidentally. Things are not what they seem” (Campion-Vincent

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2 Lavau defines the *tribunitienne* function as the representation and incarnation of popular fears, demands and aspirations in the public sphere and the political field through the Communist Party. By accepting the rules of democracy and the institutions of the public debate, this *tribunitienne* function contributes to strengthen the political system even though it is highly criticized or condemned.

2007: 11). Consequently, per conspiracy theorists, all evil things are secretly organized and scheduled long before they happen. Disasters, attacks, assassinations, alcoholism, drug addictions, the Oscars ceremony, soccer results, even food (e.g.: the ten-wiener eight-bun conspiracy), all aspect of our everyday life are ruled by the conspiracy and there are no fields, even unexpected ones<sup>3</sup>, that escape from CTs. History is not a chaotic process: there is no accident, fate or contingency. This is the *symbolic* function of CTs which puts forth an apparently coherent historical narration. And this symbolic function of rationalization is never more obvious than in conspiratorial seminal books.

### ***CTs Seminal Books as Functionalist Synthesis***

CTs seminal books offer a general overview of all the grievances addressed to their enemy (scapegoat) by conspiracy theorists: insatiable appetite for money and power, cult of secrecy, sexual deviance, evil behaviors, etc. They also materialize and summarize a simplistic meta-tale in which the enemy is responsible of all evil things. Those texts legitimize then the persecutions against the enemy/scapegoat. As authoritative narratives, they constitute a kind of totem for their political *cause* and peoples who endorse it. Those seminal books are essentially:

- Guillaume de Tyr, *Historia Rerum in Partibus Transmarinis Gestarum*, 12<sup>th</sup> century. (Knight Templar CT)
- Hieronim Zahorowski, *Monita Privata Societatis Iesu*, 1614. (Jesuit CT)
- John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free-Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies, etc., Collected from Good Authorities*, 1797. (Illuminati CT)
- Augustin de Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 1798-1799. (Free Mason CT)
- Matvei Golovinski, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, 1903. (Jewish CT)

CTs propose then a simplistic and dualistic re-enchantment of the world. Acting like a political myth, conspiracism is paradoxically reassuring – symbolically at least – because it identifies the threat. CTs express then a double *reductionism*. First, they are based on the simplistic vision of “us vs. them” or “the self vs. the others” which serves to defend and promote what is accepted against different social behaviors. Peoples are more likely to share strong biases and negative stereotypes against others and it conversely offers comfort to

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<sup>3</sup> Even the porn industry is concerned by CTs. See for instance the web site *pornoquenelle.com* launched in 2013 by Sorral’s aide Pierre Harlaut. According to the founder of this company, “It is not easy to give a lesson on Zionism but, with porn movies, it is possible”. So that, many screenplays were about raping Zionist greedy “banksters”, sexual humiliation of Romani peoples or the glorification of authoritarian regimes such like Putin’s Russia. The website finally closed in 2014.

individuals who want to retreat from world complexity and diversity. This *ego-defensive function* (Katz 1960) develops also a positive self-image in social gathering. This is what I call the *function of reification* of CTs. The enemies or scapegoats who are responsible of all evil things are not anonymous. They have names: Jesuits, Free-Masons, Communists, Jews, etc. They are portrayed as animals (*zoomorphisation*): rats, spiders, octopuses or snakes, etc. In any case these animals are culturally depreciated and they figure out the idea of a vicious crawling or surrounding threat (Giry 2015a: 47). All the more so, the scapegoats are the one and only cause behind evil things (Gorth 2012: 1) that Poliakov used to called “diabolic causality” (1980: 247). Secondly, if everything has a unique cause, everything is reducible to CTs. Consequently some totally contradictory situations must be seen as different manifestation of the (same) conspiracy. I can illustrate this with three examples.

***CTs as Paradoxical Rationalization:***

- The Two “Moon Hoaxes”:

Before July 1969, some CTs assumed that the American government had secretly implanted some military bases and weapons on the moon. On the opposite, right after the moon landing, CTs appeared to state that it was a hoax filmed in studios in Hollywood.

- Dead Peoples are Living... Living Peoples are Dead:

Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson are not dead. They live somewhere in a hidden island. Bob Dylan (motorcycle crash) and Paul McCartney (car accident) conversely died in 1966 and were replaced by look-alikes since then.

- Too Slow or Too Fast, Presidents knew:

After the WTC attacks in 2001, President Bush was accused of being involved in the conspiracy behind the 9/11 evens because he was too slow to react and far away from Washington. He was actually reading a story in a Floridian school. On the contrary, in November 2015, some conspiracist videos appeared on the internet to argue that President Hollande and the police were too fast to arrive on the attacks theaters that they had to know in advance about them.

Here we have a manifestation of a latent function of CTs I qualify as *paradoxical rationalization*: nothing can be trusted but the hypothesis of a conspiracy. There is a congenital tension, not to say an impecunious internal contradiction, in CTs: on the one hand

CTs tends to *hyper-criticism* while on the other hand they degenerate into *infra-criticism* (Nicolas 2014).

As they point out a unique enemy responsible of all evil things, CTs otherwise fulfil a function of *mobilization*: they offer defense means. If a unique enemy is behind every evil things, those evil things would ceased if this enemy is stopped or eliminated, symbolically (Korias 2015)<sup>4</sup> or even physically (Hitler 1925). Hence, conspiracy theorists are persuaded of the legitimacy and accuracy of their *cause*, socially and politically defined. Violence that the scapegoats undergo is only counter-violence or legitimate self-defense. CTs turn upside down the paradigm of violence and subversion. Because the scapegoats originated threats and violence, the persecutions they go through must be seen as good and fair justice. And, as scapegoats are usually appointed amongst *minorities* (Girard 1982: 28-29) and/or *outsiders* (Girard 1982: 50; Girardet 1986: 43), CTs appears as an act of *social conformism*, a way to *strengthen* and *mobilize* a community in (so-called) danger. No matter you call it *Anti-France* in France, *Un-American* in the United States or *Hibz França* in Algeria; scapegoats are never part of the community. They are never the “Self” but always the “Other”, never “Us” but always “Them” (ego-defensive function).

CTs flourish to reaffirm dominant and established values and ties of an *in-group* (a nation, a community, a neighborhood, etc.) at the same time they exclude the outsiders, the scapegoats, usually negatively portrayed, often depicted as a greedy vicious sexual perverse minority (Giry 2015a: 43-44) with its own system of solidarity and legitimacy in opposition with the wide majority of good peoples. They constantly look for money and twist all the powers (political, military, media, economics, etc.) in their own interests. This is why CTs must be seen as a social process, an acceptable collective deliberation or narrative for the group in which they circulate. They can develop only if they seem plausible regarding the deep-rooted values of a group and the social, historical or geographical context. It is to say that the evaluation of the plausibility of the very same CT differs from one group to another because they do not share the same collective imaginary, the same collective memory, the same biases and symbolical stereotypes. In other words, the plausibility of CTs, and its evaluation, is already tied to communities and collective judgments (Fine 2007: 9).

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<sup>4</sup> See also conspiracy theorists like Alain Soral or David Duke who claim there are too many Jews on TV networks who must be fired to free the media from Zionism.

***Evaluating the Plausibility of CTs as a Social Process:  
The Case of AIDS***

Among the African Americans, AIDS is mostly viewed as a human-made or government-made disease not only because they represent half of the infected peoples (Bird and Bogart 2005: 110), but also for AIDS is an instrument of a “Black genocide”. As shown in a 1999 survey, “compared with Whites, roughly three times as many Blacks and Hispanics reported that it was ‘very or somewhat likely’ that AIDS is ‘the result of a government plan to intentionally kill a certain group of people by genocide’ (27.8% of Blacks, 23.6% Hispanics, 8% of Whites). In the 2003 survey, roughly four times as many Blacks and almost 3 times as many Hispanics compared with Whites (34.1% of Blacks, 21.9% of Hispanics, 8.4% Whites) reported that it was ‘very or somewhat likely’ that AIDS is ‘the result of a government plan to intentionally kill a certain group of people by genocide’” (Russel, Katz and *alia* 2011: 40-41).

The AIDS issue drifts us to another manifest effect of CTs: its function of *politicization*. For *Professional*<sup>5</sup> conspiracy theorists or *political entrepreneurs* in CTs (Campion-Vincent 2015, Giry 2015b), CTs must be seen as a way to directly (LaRouche, Duke, Cheminade, etc.) or indirectly (Soral, Icke, Jones, etc.) subvert the political field and its agenda. Taking advantage of *windows of opportunity*, conspiracy theorists propose new, gigantic and controversial – public – policies, they politicize new or non-consensual themes to gain some electoral positions, they challenge the traditional political divide (left/right, liberal/conservative, etc.) to propose new ones and, through a populist rhetoric, they denounce political elites. In other words, conspiracy theorists compete with the established political elites by mobilizing some resources outside of the political field that they can use in it. But,

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5 Max Weber (1919) theorized a fundamental distinction between *professional* of politics and *amateurs*. The amateurs characterize the era Weber called the politics of notables (e.g.: Tocqueville). The political domination, a mixture of charismatic and traditional authority, is the mere continuation of the social domination. Politics is a kind of hobby for socialites for whom politics is not their main source of incomes. For professionals, on the contrary, politics is a full-time employment based on legal-rational authority. They earn their main incomes from their political activities. There is theoretically no homology between social and political domination anymore even if, of course, the professional and the amateur are two ideal-types which concretely intermingle into one another: amateurs professionalized while professionals acquire notability.

CTs are also a political resource that ordinary or mainstream political entrepreneurs or parties can use in electoral races.

### *Politicize with CTs... and CTs as policies*

- The 1986 “Proposition 64” :

In 1986, the LaRouche movement initiates in California the “Proposition 64”, the biggest referendum on AIDS policy in the United States. It required that the estimated 300,000 peoples who had AIDS or who were "carriers" of the virus would be reported to public health officials and more than 100,000 peoples would be fired from jobs in agriculture, restaurants and schools. It also recommended that the state could be legally obliged to quarantine anyone who comes in contact with the virus (Krip 1986). Finally, the measure was defeated by a margin of 71% to 29%. Taking advantage of an approximate understanding of a new disease, LaRouche used it as a window of opportunity for his organization. He dramatized the epidemic which was presented as a kind of gay/pedophile cancer or a weapon in the hands of children abusers in schools. Per LaRouche and his followers, the entire political struggle must be rearticulated around the AIDS issue. For them, the new political divide was simplistically clear: LaRouche and his aides, the supporters of the children cause and the righteous society *vs.* the partisans of homosexuality, pedophilia, drug addictions and social chaos.

- The 2009 *liste antisioniste* (Anti-Zionist List):

During the 2009 European parliament elections in France, Yahia Gouasmi (an Iranian agent and founder of the Anti-Zionist Party), far right activist and conspiracy theorist Alain Soral, and stand-up man Dieudonné led an anti-Zionist list in Ile-de-France. Per them, France is ruled by Zionism and the only real political divide is supporting or rejecting this illegitimate and unlawful domination. All the political parties but the National Front and some obscure far right organizations are supposed to be allied to Zionism. The list obtained 1.30% of the votes.

Finally, particularly when they are used by non-professional conspiracy theorists in the political field, CTs fulfils the *tribunitienne* function that Lavau characterized. Like populist statements, CTs appear as a way for outsiders or commoners to possibly see themselves or their demands, fears and expectations taking into account within the political field. Tea Parties, the election of Trump or Cheminade running for president in France, etc.; all those situations contribute to involve CTs and their supporters in the legal-rational voting process.

Paradoxically, incorporating CTs in the political field contribute to its strengthening and legitimization because it turns conspiracist actors away from radical or even violent activities outside the mainstream political field. Barkun (2013: 15-38; 2015) calls this phenomenon “mainstreaming the fringe.” Even though conspiracist political leaders like Lyndon LaRouche, Jacques Cheminade or Kesha Rogers and opportunist political actors like Ross Perrot, Victor Orban, Donald Trump or Jean-Marie Le Pen contest the political system, they nonetheless accept its rules when they campaign and run for some electoral positions.

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