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Foreword

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An old myth reactivated in mass culture

The first decade of the 21st century, particularly since the 11th September terrorist attacks in the United States, has been marked by the rise of conspiracy-related discourses. Correlatively, numerous studies in the human sciences disciplines have been published, which address this phenomenon. Certain authors have marked out the field, such as Robert Goldberg (2001), Jane Parish and Martin Parker (2001), Peter Knight (2000, 2002, 2003), Michael Barkun (2013), Harry West and Todd Sanders (2003), Véronique Campion-Vincent (2005a, b), and Pierre-André Taguieff (2005, 2006, 2013). Popular culture, as has been well demonstrated by Mark Fenster (2008), has very swiftly taken up this lucrative theme—for example, in the television series *X-Files* (1993–2002) or in Dan Brown's bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

Older studies remain as valuable references, such as Richard Hofstadter's essay (1965) on the anti-Communist hysteria in the America of the 1950s or the works of Norman Cohn (1967) and Pierre-André Taguieff (1992) on the myth of the "world Jewish conspiracy." In the 1980s, Léon Poliakov (2006) and Raoul Girardet (1986) located the obsession about conspiracy as being among the great myths of politics. A collective work under the direction of Carl Graumann and Serge Moscovici (1987) laid out the perspective of the social sciences on the modern forms taken by conspiracy theory. What is new is that today conspiracy theories are no longer restricted to the margins of public opinion but are being spread as part of mass culture.

Conspiracist discourse draws upon an easily recognizable specific vocabulary: the denunciation of the "lie" or "deception" promulgated by the "official truth," the "revelation," or "uncovering" of a different truth (the "hidden truth"), the designation of an "occult in-group" operating "in the shadows" and controlling the world with an "invisible hand" and driven by dark designs. Conspiracist imagery makes use of a limited number of motifs, always the same: those of an octopus or a spider ensnaring the world in its tentacles or its web, of a puppet-master pulling the strings, of plotters with faces masked by balaclavas, of occult symbols which arcane knowledge is needed to decipher. Thanks to Emmanuel Kreis (2012), researchers now have available an anthology of older conspiracy texts which allow for comparisons to be made between the various conspiracy-related myths. Finally, the Internet, with its abundant conspiracy websites, offers an exceptional field of investigation for researchers.

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Parallel to these, anti-conspiracist discourses—at times shared by researchers in the human sciences—denounce, occasionally too abruptly, those who hold to conspiracy explanations with recurrent terms of their own: "conspiracy theory," "myth," "imposters" (an accusation used by both sides!), "paranoia," "conspiracy-based delusion." Such active and open scorn of conspiracy theory can lead its authors to aberrantly extend that label to any questioning of an event, whereas that designation should be reserved solely for those theories that present a historical dimension and that interpret whole spans of history, and even history in totality, as being the result of the intervention of "forces of darkness." There are now websites devoted to the tracking of conspiracy theories: for example, the French site run by Rudy Reichstadt since 2007[1] and the blog of four British psychologists since 2012.[2] More and more numerous opinion surveys are measuring how far conspiracy theories spread among the public (publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/page/6).

By adopting the conspiracy theory dossier, the journal *Diogenes* aims at shedding light on this through a pluridisciplinary approach: to this end, history, sociology, psychology, and political science have been enlisted. We have sought to be genuinely international and in particular to include the often little-known studies of researchers from the former Communist countries. Following the success of the call for contributions that we sent out, the editors of *Diogenes* agreed that a dual number should be devoted to the conspiracy phenomenon.

The parallel between rumours and conspiracy theories

It is not purely fortuitous that several of the authors of this edition are also specialists in rumour.[3] These researchers quite naturally extended their interest to conspiracy theories when they observed that the concepts and psycho-social mechanisms that they mobilized for the study of rumour applied also to conspiracy theory.

Allport and Postman (1945) established that rumours come into existence when events are perceived by a population as being both *important*, historically and/or emotionally, and as *ambiguous* in the sense that the information about them been judged as insufficient or not very reliable. It is events of this nature that give rise to conspiracy theories: the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963, the death of Princess Diana in 1997, the events of 9/11, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris in 2015, and so on. The psychological and social functions of conspiracy theories are very close to those fulfilled by rumour: a *cognitive* function in that they supply information, even if it is false, and even more, explanations for what otherwise seems incomprehensible; an *affective* function, in that they enable the expression of feelings (fear or hope in the case of rumours, distrust toward the institutions, even hatred of the "system" for conspiracy theory); a *normative* function, because rumours and conspiracy theories identify the good and the bad, those on the side of good, and those on the side of evil. No doubt, for conspiracy theory, there can also be added a function of *mobilization*: those who seriously credit their existence often adopt a posture of warning those around them and of actively engaging against the dark side, an engagement that allows them to see themselves as heroic prophets taking action against the lamentable state of the world.

The factor that drives the emergence, spread, and subsequent belief in the rumour has been clearly identified by psycho-sociologist Michel-Louis Rouquette (1990): it is the sense of *involvement*, that is to say the fact that individuals come to feel personally affected, objectively or subjectively, by the messages that are going around. A person will take on board much more favorably a rumour that appears to confirm his or her own ideas, feelings, or preconceived beliefs. The response to conspiracy theories is no different: the tendency to adhere to conspiracy theories, and to certain particular theories as opposed to others, depends in the first instance on confirmation and social distinction.

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Rumours and conspiracy theories equally have in common their development in the gray zone between what is true and what is false: the zone of the plausible. Nothing a priori allows a distinction to be made between information that is false and information that is genuine. False rumours attract belief because there are indeed some rumours which turn out to be true; thus, while there are false rumours about Internet viruses, such viruses do also certainly exist; there are mindless panics around certain foods, but tainted foodstuffs have indeed occurred; there are stories of crimes that turn out to be imaginary, but the news is full of actual criminal activities. This holds equally for conspiracy theories: the genuine historical existence of conspiracies—whether they succeeded or failed—gives believability to conspiracy theories.

The identical character of rumours and conspiracy theories is obvious when it comes to "negationist rumours" (Renard, 2007), which deny the reality of an event, as for example the denial of Nazi gas chambers, the first moon landing in 1969, or the death of Elvis Presley. In his book entitled *Court traité de complotologie* [A Short Treatise on Conspirology], Pierre-André Taguieff observes that "the credence accorded to conspiracy theories starts out from the simple hearsay belief that a conspiracy exists […], a phenomenon deriving from the field of rumour" (2013: 16), an observation that leads that author to contest the appropriateness of the expression "conspiracy theory," preferring to use that of "rumour of a conspiracy," "conspiracy hypothesis," or "conspiracy imagination." Conspiracy theory in the general sense nevertheless is distinct from that of rumour by the fact that it involves an *ideological construction* in which rumours are "formalized and instrumentalized by discourses of propaganda" (*ibid*.). Conspiracy theories, by marshalling rumours and allegations in a common direction, construct a *political* narrative, which designates a named enemy (a group, a sect, a country, a government); they therefore extend beyond the simple level of a belief in a rumour to reach that of social and ideological representations (Rouquette, 1996), whence the important role played by leaders and the groups that follow them in the conspiracy theory phenomenon.

Distribution of this number's contents

The 19 articles of this number reflect the diversity of approaches and of fields of research into conspiracy theory. These articles are distributed across five parts.

Part I addresses the question of the definition of "conspiracy theories." The reactions to the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 have led to a critical interrogation of the application of the idea of conspiracy on the information market, whether through the Internet (Bronner) or in the public media (Kreis). Conspiracy theories are on occasion objects of fascination, or on others, objects to be refuted. To avoid becoming mired in these shifting sands, researchers need to establish a solid investigative framework based on sound principles (Butter and Knight). They need also to take as a basis for their work the unvarying characteristics of conspiracy theory as political myth (Giry) and bring attention to its ideological affinities, such as negationism (Reichstadt).

Part II emphasizes the contributions to be made from certain areas of the human sciences—linguistics, social psychology, sociology—for the understanding of conspiracy theory: what is the rhetoric of the conspiracist discourse (Nicolas)? Who are those who give lead to (Campion-Vincent), transmit (Delouvée) and give active credence to (Renard) conspiracy theories?

Part III directs attention to the success of conspiracy theories in the former Communist countries, notably in Russia (François and Schmidt) and in the former Czechoslovakia during the turmoil of the "Velvet Revolution" (Haluzik, Panczová and Janeček).

Part IV concentrates on conspiracy theories in the United States on various levels, whether around the 9/11 attacks (Fenster) or the rumours concerning President Obama (Barkun, Fine).

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Finally, Part V sets out the place occupied by conspiracy theories in contemporary popular culture. The mysterious disappearance of an airliner aroused a flourishing and imaginative range of explanations (Van de Winkel). The theme of the all-powerful force of financial manipulation recurs frequently in conspiracist accusations (Josset). Modern-day subcultures make use of conspiracy theories, as for example in the field of rap music (Soteras) or in that of enigmas of the paranormal (Karbovnik).

All the articles gathered in this number provide, if not a complete overview of the situation, at least a clear perception of the research currently being undertaken into conspiracy theory. It is a reasonable wager that both dimensions will continue to develop in parallel as the present state of the world becomes less and less readable. If research cannot claim to neutralize this eagerness to accredit a slanted reading of world affairs, it can well aim, on the other hand, to supply the analytical tools needed to come to an understanding of the mechanisms of this phenomenon and to pursue critical reflection upon it. Such is the aim of this number of our journal.

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Notes

1. Conspiracy Watch. Observatoire du conspirationnisme et des théories du complot, conspiracywatch.info.
2. Bob Brotherton, Dan Jolley, Christopher Thresher-Andrews, Mike Wood, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, conspiracypsychology.com.
3. Some of these have already contributed to an earlier issue of *Diogenes* edited by Véronique Campion-Vincent ("Rumors and Urban Legends", *Diogenes* 54/1, journals.sagepub.com/toc/dioa/54/1).

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