

Extending the domain of denial: conspiracism and negationism

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One of the leading American conspiracist authors on the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, David Ray Griffin, freely recognizes that he has been 'largely inspired' by the writings of a certain Eric Hufschmid, an American with no recognized qualifications in the fields of architecture, chemistry or structural calculus but who was the first to have methodically assembled the opinion, expressed through a book (2002) and a video (2003), that the World Trade Center towers were in reality the object of a 'controlled demolition' by means of explosives which had earlier been positioned in them. Reading Hufschmid's book is explicitly recommended in the notorious accusatory film of Dylan Avery, *Loose Change* (2005), which brought to world-wide attention the theory that a conspiracy lay behind the 9/11 events. It was following his meeting with Hufschmid that the American heir to a fortune and philanthropist Jimmy Walter launched a vast advertising campaign with the intention of contesting the 'official version' of the 9/11 attacks, and founded the website ReOpen911.org¹. An adherent to a number of conspiracy theories, Eric Hufschmid thinks that the gas chambers used by the Nazis in World War II never existed and that stories of them were a 'Zionist invention²'.

This conviction was one which the noted French intellectual and former Communist deputy Roger Garaudy made his own in his publication *Les Mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne* [The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics]. The book, published in 1995 by the holocaust-denying publishing house La Vieille Taupe, led to its author being convicted in court for contesting a crime against humanity. During an interview in 2006, Garaudy asserted as well that, in his view, the 2001 terror attacks had been 'organized by the White House' (Minard and Prazan, 2007: 414–415)³.

Is this intersection of negationism and the questioning of the 'official version' of the 9/11 attacks – one of the most widespread conspiracy myths of the present time – a pure coincidence, or does it on the other hand reveal a convergence of attitudes between conspiracists and negationists?

The conspiracist presuppositions of negationism

The term 'negationism', after the French neologism 'négationnisme' coined by Henry Rousso (1987: 176–183), emerged nearly 30 years ago to designate the stance of those self-styled 'revisionists' who denied or professed major doubts about the industrial-scale extermination of the Jews of Europe by Nazi Germany. The intention of this labelling was to expose the pseudo-scientific character of the revisionists' projection of history and by this means to remove from them their

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claim to constitute a whole separate 'school of history'. 'Negationism' has since largely become an established term, supplanting at least to some extent the term 'revisionism' and becoming extended to apply to the contestation of other crimes against humanity, such as the Armenian genocide or that of the Tutsis in Rwanda.

Holocaust denial today meets generally with a wall of incredulity on the part of French public opinion. A poll carried out by the public opinion survey institute IFOP in September 2014 showed that only 3% of the French population considered that extermination of six million Jews during the Second World War was a piece of invention or exaggeration (Reynié, 2014: 18). The same survey nevertheless indicated that a significant proportion of that public (25%) assented to the idea that 'Zionism is an international organization whose aim is to influence the world and society for the benefit of the Jews'. Most markedly, the proportion of French citizens who thought that 'there existed a Zionist plot of world-wide dimensions' rose to 16%. Therefore, even if it continues to be anathematized, the negationist ideology still seems to have a potential for non-negligible progression within society.

It is indeed true that the theme of the 'Jewish plot' is embedded in the heart of negationist discourse, as attested by the notorious 'sixty-word statement⁴' of Robert Faurisson, one of the leading figures of international negationism:

The alleged Hitlerian gas chambers and the alleged genocide of the Jews form one and the same historical lie, which permitted a gigantic financial swindle whose chief beneficiaries have been the State of Israel and international Zionism, and whose main victims have been the German people and the Palestinian people as a whole. (Igounet, 2012: 249)

Faurisson's declaration, which essentially sums up the entire negationist doctrine, presents the characteristics of the conspiracist narrative at its most caricatural. It is based on the complete non-acceptance of extremely well established reality (referring to the 'gas chambers' as 'so-called'; or the 'genocide' as simply 'alleged'); on the idea of an extraordinary and incommensurable manipulation (an 'historical lie'; 'a gigantic swindle'); on the inversion of victimhood and the charges levelled against the 'plotters' whom the 'lie' is presumed to benefit (the 'State of Israel and international Zionism' as well as their accomplices, the '[German] leaders'); finally, on the revelation of a hidden motive, where the alleged 'swindle' is held to be both political and financial in nature, so allowing two major traditional themes of anti-Semitic accusation to the linked together: the prejudice about Jewish 'lust for wealth' associated with a plan for political domination, the myth of the 'Jewish conspiracy' (Taguieff, 2015a: 56–59).

From Holocaust denial to conspiracist re-writing of the facts

The conspiracist outlook of the Holocaust deniers and their adherents does not appear to be limited to the history of the Second World War. Without claiming to have accomplished an exhaustive coverage of the field, we would like to cite five particularly emblematic cases of this negationist penchant for conspiracist 'retrology⁵'.

Let us take first the case of Vincent Reynouard. A militant negationist who makes no attempt to hide his fascination for Hitler's regime, this former mathematics teacher is also the compiler of a vituperative video lashing out at the 'half-century of official lies' around the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane. In this video he contests the reality of the facts established by the 1953 Bordeaux military tribunal during a highly publicized trial, which saw the sentencing of 13 Alsatian soldiers 'unwillingly' forced to serve in the German Army (Chombart de Louwe, 2006: 27).

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Paul-Eric Blanrue, who in 2010 was the driving force behind a document in support of Reynouard and about whom the historian Valérie Igounet has shown that he projected himself as 'the worthy successor of Robert Faurisson' (Igounet, 2012: 399), is also the maker of a film about the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, which attributes the origin of this massacre to an Americano-Israeli conspiracy (Reichstadt, 2014a).

Claude Karnoouh, a university academic who became notorious in the early 1980s for taking up the defence of Robert Faurisson and for asserting his conviction that 'the gas chambers never existed', declared at the time of the shootings in the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 2014 that he was 'almost entirely sure' that this constituted a 'false flag attack' (Reichstadt, 2014b).

Maria Poumier, a former university lecturer in Spanish who was banned from participating in her research team at the University Paris 8 for her activism in support of publicizing the views of Roger Garaudy, is one of the main translators of the writings of the anti-Semitic author Israel Shamir. She produced a documentary which presented the 1994 attack against the Jewish community of Buenos Aires as a 'false flag operation' orchestrated by the Israeli secret services. The film is dedicated to the memory of the Argentine negationist Norberto Ceresole and the Tunisian Hussein Triki, the former representative of the Arab League in Argentina, who believed that 'the Holocaust was an invention of World Zionism' and that Israel had prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks (MEMRI, 2011). The film was also published and disseminated on the internet by Smaïn Bedrouni, administrator of the Stcom.net website (Vitkine, 2005: 93–100), who was convicted in 2007 for anti-Semitism.

As a fifth and final example, let us mention the case of Isabelle Coutant-Peyre, who was Smain Bedrouni's lawyer. Equally close to Roger Garaudy (she was his defence counsel before the courts and co-founded a literary journal with him and Maria Poumier), this former associate of Jacques Vergès played a significant role in spreading the conspiracy theory relating to the Mohamed Merah affair, suggesting publicly that the young man had in reality been entrapped by the French secret services, which must consequently be those who were truly responsible for the outrage (Reichstadt, 2012).

A conspiracist tendency structured around the denunciation of the 'Americano-Zionist axis'

That there is currently a proliferation of conspiracy theories in the public domain is a broadly shared observation (Campion-Vincent, 2005; Taguieff, 2005, 2013). Any notable event is henceforth subject to conspiracist reconstruction. If this situation may in part be explained by our cognitive vulnerability (Bronner, 2013), it also owes much to a perceived social need based on well-identified psycho-social factors and into which there often enters a consolatory dimension taking the form of a denial of the real (Reichstadt, 2015: 5). Apart from the way in which the internet has revolutionized our means of communication and access to information, this need can only be conceived by associating it with the presence on offer of a conspiracist political ideology (Taïeb, 2010) based on the postulate that the 'elites' and the 'media' are knowingly collaborating to conceal the truth from 'the people'.

On the internet, a diverse galaxy of individuals and groups, stimulated by 'conspiracy entrepreneurs' (Goldberg, 2001), ensures a continuous flow of conspiracist content. This 'conspirosphere⁶' may be defined as the complete set of those websites and blogs which dedicate a significant part of their activity to promoting a conspiracist interpretation of history. This revisionist impulse extends on occasion to the history of earlier centuries, with the emergence of propositions of the 'recentist' type calling into question the history of the world of the last two millennia. For its part, contemporary history, from the French Revolution to the era of 'globalized terrorism', has been entirely revisited.

The protagonists of this conspirosphere come from political orientations that are sometimes far removed from one another and which do not all belong to the same linguistic or cultural zones. All nevertheless have as a common denominator the constant application of a rhetoric, which, directly or indirectly, improperly attributes the origin of an historical event or a public incident to an unacknowledgeable plot whose presumed instigators – or those thought to profit from it – are alleged to be conspiring in their own interests to conceal the truth.

This 'tone of paranoia', identified more than half a century ago (Hofstadter, 2012), extends its reach in a fashion which is less anarchic than one might think at first sight. Empirical observation and all available measures of its audience make it possible to state that the most structured, the most compact, the most influential and most dynamic locus for the propagation of conspiracy theories – both for the rate and volume of its production and by the very considerable variety of the notions it embraces – spans a current of inter-related groups following a similar trajectory which some have proposed calling the 'Dieudonné galaxy' (Briganti et al., 2011), whose most notorious activists are the actor Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, the polemicist Alain Soral and the conspiracist author Thierry Meyssan. Through the medium of two of the most accessed far-right internet sites in France, egaliteetreconcilisation.fr and quenelplus.com as well as through the conspiracist platform reseauvoltairenet.org (Gombin, 2014, Reichstadt, 2015), this microcosm is heavily involved in a hyperbolical denunciation of the power of the United States and of a fantastical 'Zionism' fused together in a single 'Americano-Zionist axis'. It controls not only a network of businesses and associations which assure it a relative financial independence (Haziza, 2014) but also, since January 2015, a partisan political formation called 'Réconciliation nationale'.

A conspirosphere permeated with negationism

Thierry Meyssan, who controls the Réseau Voltaire (where Robert Faurisson is presented as 'one of the leading figures of the revisionist current', coded language intended to legitimize Faurisson's analyses as being serious research), is the author of a best-selling book, several hundred thousand copies of which have been distributed throughout the world, and whose principal argument is that no aircraft crashed into the Pentagon on the 11th September 2001 (Meyssan, 2002). In November 2005 he tried to give concrete form to the disparate cluster of conspiracist groups by organizing an 'anti-imperialist conference' in Brussels under the title of 'Axis for Peace', which was attended by the most active lecturers promoting conspiracy theories of the period.

Out of this odd miscellany emerged convergent viewpoints dating from immediately after 9/11, but also, for some, these convergences dated from the NATO military intervention in Kosovo (1999). 'Axis for Peace' effectively brought together occasionally highly colourful personages such as the Briton David Shayler, the historian Annie Lacroix-Riz (theoretician of the 'synarchist' plot of rule by a secret elite), Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, the Italian journalist and Euro-deputy Giulietto Chiesa (co-director of a film on 9/11with a conspiracist flavour), the Russian general Leonid Ivashov, the former German minister Andreas von Bülow, the Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont and his journalist countryman Michel Collon, and finally, the conspiracist author Webster G. Tarpley. The latter is a former member of the organization of American conspiracist Lyndon Larouche, which was particularly well represented at 'Axis for Peace' by the Frenchman Jacques Cheminade (president of the Larouchist movement Solidarité & Progrès) and the German woman Helga Zepp, who was Lyndon Larouche's wife. Declarations made by Larouche himself were not always exempt from negationist excess: in 1978, for example he declared that 'only' a million and a half Jews died during the Second World War and that the Nazis had never sought to exterminate them (King, 1989).

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Among the official partners of 'Axis for Peace' there figured in particular the newspaper *American Free Press*, founded in 2001 by the anti-Semitic activist Willis Carto. Carto was also the founder of a negationist publication, *The Barnes Review* and, in 1978, the Institute for Historical Review (IHR), which is the principal American negationist organization.

There is no reason for astonishment, then, that such a grouping should come together. Indeed, among the speakers at the 'Axis for Peace' conference there also figured the *American Free Press* journalist Christopher Bollyn (who, while disputing that he was a negationist, claimed to have been able to find 'no proof of any large crematorium in which hundreds of people could have been gassed and burnt' in Auschwitz), as well as the already mentioned Claude Karnoouh, who for a brief period became part of the board of administration of the Réseau Voltaire in February 2005.

The intermeshing between conspiracists and negationists became effective with the publication of texts attributed to the former academic and militant negationist Serge Thion in 2006 on dieudo. net, the website of the supporters of Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, and the invitation on to the stage of one of the latter's shows of Robert Faurisson in December 2008 (Igounet, 2012: 365–379). It is thus evident that, for at least a decade, the conspirosphere has been giving free rein to its negationist tendency. Through print publications, videos, comedy performances, cartoons or public appearances, Alain Soral, Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, the former Belgian deputy Laurent Louis or the cartoonist Noël Gérard (alias 'Jo Lecorbeau') persistently activate negationist themes by adopting for themselves Faurisson's assertions or by playing on the dual register of exasperation with the 'Holocaust religion' and with the 'Holocaust industry', which they claim ensures political immunity for the state of Israel and diverts to the sole benefit of the Jews the dividends of worldwide compassion.

Similar content may also be found on the conspiracist websites stopmensonges.com or metatv. org, whose principal promoter, Patrick D'Hondt (alias 'Tepa'), was a French departmental delegate of a small anti-Europe political party, l'Union populaire républicaine, which was very much involved in conspiracism. The director of publication for alterinfo.net, a conspiracist website working in partnership with al-Manar, the television channel of the Lebanese Hezbollah⁷, was for his part convicted in 2009 for contesting crimes against humanity after publishing an article containing negationist statements.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has played a central role in the propagation of negationism internationally. In December 2006, Teheran orchestrated an international conference on 'the reality of the Holocaust', which brought together 67 speakers, among them Robert Faurisson, at the initiative of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The latter moreover brought attention to himself by his negationist remarks (in which he denounced the 'myth of the massacre of the Jews') and then, in the years following the conference, by his conspiracist diatribes about the 9/11 attacks⁸.

Since 2011, a colloquium on 'Hollywoodism' has been organized each year on the fringe of the Teheran International Film Festival. This regular event provides a meeting platform for negationists and conspiracists from all over the world. In February 2012 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took opportunity of the gathering to award to Robert Faurisson a 'prize for courage, resistance and combativity' and a laudatory film about Faurisson by Paul-Éric Blanrue was screened. Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala attended as well to present his film 'L'Antisémite' (described as 'the first comedy about the Holocaust' [sic]). The conspiracist author Webster G. Tarpley, the 'anti-Zionist' film director Béatrice Pignède, Maria Poumier and a representative of Vincent Reynouard were other attendees.

For its third event (February 2013), the 'Hollywoodism' colloquium drew several activists of the Mouvement pour la Vérité sur le 11 septembre [Movement for Truth about 9/11] such as William Rodriguez, Mike Gravel, James Fetzer (Scholars for 9/11 Truth), Kevin Barrett (Truth Jihad), and William Engdahl, but also Thierry Meyssan, Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, Maria

Poumier, Béatrice Pignède, Paul-Éric Blanrue, Isabelle Coutant-Peyre and Thomas Werlet (of the Parti Solidaire Français).

An international colloquium of the same type took place in Teheran from the 29 September to the 1 October 2014 with the attendance of Thierry Meyssan, Maria Poumier and the co-founder of the French conspiracist website close to the Soral-Dieudonné movement, cercledesvolontaires.fr. Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala for his part travelled to Teheran in February 2015 to award a prize (a 'Golden Quenelle') to Mr Ahmadinejad.

Conspiracism and negationism: a common method

The arguments used by conspiracists present troubling analogies with those of negationists, in particular when it comes to the very selective application of sceptical doubt. Pierre-Vidal Naquet identified this type of dubious strategy in the summary he put forward of the principles of the negationist method:

Any document, in general, which informs us at first hand on the methods used by the Nazis is a fake or a document that has been falsified. [...] Any Nazi document providing direct evidence is taken at its face value if it is written in coded language, but dismissed (or under-interpreted) if it is written in plain language. [...] Any evidence given by Nazis subsequent to the end of the war [,,,] is considered as having been obtained under torture or through intimidation. [...] Finally and especially, anything which can make that frightful history appear unexceptional and credible, which can show how it evolved and can provide terms for political comparison is ignored or falsified. (Vidal-Naquet, 2005: 35–39)

As the historian Bernard Comte explains, the negationist's 'method' "associates hypercriticism with pure invention, a nit-picking over details and words together with a massive disregard for the context, and seeks to make what is initially asserted appear as the conclusion of a demonstration" (Comte, 1990). Another historian, Deborah Lipstadt, speaks of a 'strategy of distortion' at the end of which 'the truth is intermingled with absolute falsehoods' while 'the abundance of documents and personal evidence which confirm the reality of the Holocaust is set completely aside' (1993: 2). This critical selectivity is very close to what Pierre-André Taguieff in his analysis of conspiracist discourses proposes calling 'cognitive asymmetry', which consists of showing 'an attitude of extreme criticism towards the official version of some particular event at the same time as an extreme credulity towards 'conspiracy theories' presenting as 'alternative' explanations' (Taguieff, 2015b: 58).

In 2009, Mark Weber, the director of the American negationist organization the IHR, argued for a fundamental change of tactics in the struggle against 'Jewish influence'. Noting the decline in public interest in 'revisionist' theories, he proposed abandoning the claim of the non-existence of the gas chambers, considering that maintaining this position was 'counter-productive'. He dropped the mask of the disinterested quest for historical truth in order to urge his fellow-travellers to undertake the only real struggle worthwhile engaging in: the denunciation of the tentacles of 'Judeo-Zionist power' (Oppenheimer, 2009).

Two years later, to mark the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the publishing house Le Retour aux Sources⁹ published a collective work entitled *Le 11-Septembre n'a pas eu lieu* [9/11 Never Happened]. The book, with contributions from Léon Camus (of the far-right newspaper *Rivarol*), from the former police superintendent Hubert Marty-Vrayance (close to the Réseau Voltaire), the retired teacher Pierre Dortiguier (a theoretician of recentism) and the occultist conspiracist Salim Laïbi (aka 'Le Libre Penseur' [the Free Thinker]) among others, contained a preface by Alain Soral, in which could be read:

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Meyssan's book [on the 9/11 attacks] offers a magnificent example of what historical revisionism could become [...] were it not for the iniquitous Gayssot law! The collaborators with the Empire are moreover not deceived, those who will go so far as to claim, in the face of the vast waves of doubt about the official version, that to contest this is like questioning the existence of the gas chambers. A proposition which is perfectly true! (Soral, 2011).

Assuming without compunction the identification of the negationist campaign with the cause of the 9/11 conspiracists, Alain Soral explicitly considers these as coming together on the same revisionist horizon. Is it not possible, then, that the 'revisionism in real time' (Vitkine, 2005: 229), which conspiracism constitutes in the internet age, might henceforth be seen with good reason as prolonging by different means the anti-Jewish crusade engaged in by the negationists?

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

- 1. The French affiliate of this site, ReOpen911.info. was created in 2006.
- S. Malterre, 11-Septembre: Enquête sur la théorie du complot [11 September: Investigation into the Conspiracy Theory], documentary broadcast on Canal+ on 11 September 2009 at 10.55 pm.
- According to Garaudy the aircraft that smashed into the towers had been 'remotely controlled' by the Pentagon, and Al-Qaida was simply an American invention.
- 4. This statement was read aloud by Robert Faurisson on 17 December 1980 on the Europe 1 radio station.
- 'Retrology' is the translator's proposed English equivalent for the Italian neologism *dietrologia* defined as 'the critical analysis of events in the attempt to identify behind their apparent causes their true hidden intentions' (Cortelazzo and Cardinale, 1986: 61).
- 6. The author and film director Tristan Mendès-France seems to have been the first to use the French term 'complosphère' [of which 'conspirosphere' is offered as an English equivalent note of the translator] in an interview broadcast on Arte on 9 February 2010 (soirée Thema, 'Main basse sur l'info', dailymotion. com/video/xc5jqs la-mecanique-du-complot news).
- T. Anspach, Les Effroyables imposteurs [The Frightful Imposters], Doc en stock. [Doc en stock is a
 documentary production company (http://www.docenstock.com/)]. Documentary broadcast on Arte on 9
 February 2010.
- 8. Cf. 'Ahmadinejad qualifie de "gros mensonge" les attentats du 11 septembre [*Ahmadinejad calls the 11 September attacks a 'big lie'*]', *AFP*; 6 March 2010; 'Ahmadinejad: 9/11 "suspect event"', *BBC News*, 16 April 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle east/7350830.stm
- This publishing house was co-founded by Michel Drac, a blogger close to the far-right identity movement and a former member of the national board of Égalité & Réconciliation (which he left in 2010).

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