

On the Logic of Conspiracy* Theories and the Soros Myth

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the general logic and rhetoric of conspiracy theories, an analysis of the Soros Myth will provide some additional perspective to the question of what makes such constructions attractive to the eyes of their followers. On the one hand, the appeal of conspiracy theories – especially in times of economic, social and political crisis – depends on the fact that, as they oversimplify reality, they make it more manageable from a cognitive and narrative point of view. On the other, they exploit the deep contradictions that run through the liberal-democratic post-1989 European narrative, according to which equality and social justice may be brought about by enlightened elites. Through the well-laid plans of ultranationalist political consultants in the years 2000, the traditional antisemitic archive from which the Soros myth draws most of its tropes has been instrumentally hybridized with a legitimate widespread concern for the erosion of ordinary citizens' agency in 21st century politics. Hence the most hackneyed commonplaces of historical antisemitism have been passed off as the struggle against the Establishment.

Keywords

Conspiracy Theories; Antisemitism; Umberto Eco; George Soros; Agency

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1. The Logic of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy Theories are based on a paranoid style of thinking that drastically reduces the complexity of social phenomena through monocausal explanations that attribute any event that is perceived as negative or disturbing to the precise destructive will of some hidden puppeteer. This of course allows for a great saving in terms of cognitive energy, given that social complexity is boiled down to a single explanation and is made to fit the primordial narrative of the eternal conflict between Good and Evil. To do so conspiracy theorists need to discard all contrary evidence, through specious arguments meant to de-legitimize all adverse sources. What makes conspiracy theorists eminently recognizable are the pseudo-arguments with which they sweep away any attempt to refute their hypotheses.

Take, for example, the famous retorts to the demonstration that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (the mother of all conspiracy theories) were a forged document. In 1921 a reporter from the *Times* of London proved that the Protocols were a clumsy patchwork of para-literary sources.¹ Four years later, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler disqualified this public rebuttal as «the best proof that [the Protocols] are true». In 1938, Julius Evola wrote that «the problem of [the Protocols'] “authenticity” is secondary and to be replaced by the much more essential and serious question of their “truthfulness”», while Ezra Pound (1943) produced his own sublime *non sequitur*: «certainly the Protocols are false, and this is the proof of their authenticity. Jews have been working on forged documents for twenty-four centuries».

Such topsy-turvy logic is based on a few basic mechanisms:

- 1) The reversal of the burden of proof: *You show me that there is no conspiracy.*
- 2) The circularity of reasoning: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion confirm that there is the conspiracy, the existence of the conspiracy confirms that the Protocols are authentic.*
- 3) The reversal of the relationship of cause and effect: *The Jews persecute anyone who claims that there is a Jewish conspiracy.*
- 4) The endless framing of plots: *Bankers and/or Bolsheviks are the puppets of the Freemasons who are the puppets of the Jews who are the puppets of who knows what other Unknown Superiors...*

The paralogical structures of conspiracy theories have been thoroughly studied in the field of semiotics, first and foremost by Umberto Eco and by several of his students,² and then by other authors and scholars whose more recent studies have highlighted the vast array of cognitive biases that accom-

¹ Philip Graves, «“Jewish Peril” Exposed. Historic “Fake”. Details of the Forgery», *The Times*, 17.8.1921. On the complicated genealogy of the Protocols and on the history of their debunking, see Cohn 1966. Umberto Eco told the story in two of his novels – *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Prague Cemetery* – as well as in the sixth of his Harvard Lectures (Eco 1994) and in several minor articles and occasional writings, including: “Sinagoga di Satana e Protocolli dei Savi di Sion” (1992), now in Eco 1999; “Gli italiani sono antisemiti?” (2002), “Il lupo e l’agnello: retorica della prevaricazione” (2004) and “The Power of Falsehood” (introduction to Will Eisner *The Plot. The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Norton, 2005), all republished in Eco 2006.

² See for example Escudero (1978), Pozzato (1989 ed.), Blasi (1990), Pisanty (1998).

pany this particular style of thinking (see for example Leone [ed.] 2016, Wu Ming 1 2021, Bianchi 2021 and Lorusso 2022). But as in the past twenty to thirty years – catalyzed by the advent of the internet and social media – the phenomenon has spread to previously unmatched proportions, the rhetorical strategies employed by the divulggers of conspiracy theories seem to have shifted from an attempt at mimicking the argumentative structures of scientific or historiographic discourse to a more emotionally-driven recourse to memes and other elementary forms of communication whose argumentative content is of little to no consequence. For example, Holocaust deniers have abandoned the close (mis)reading of documents inaugurated by Robert Faurisson, Arthur Butz, and other “technical” negationists of the ’80s and ’90’s, to embrace a proselytizing activity aimed at disseminating fragments of negationist discourse on the Internet. As a result of this shift, the enlightened attitude with which Eco and his epigons approached the deconstruction of the conspiracists’ faulty syllogisms in a bid to demonstrate their logical unsustainability has given way to another set of analytical concerns. The question isn’t so much “Is there logic in their madness?” (and “How can it be taken apart?”), but “What makes conspiracy theories so attractive to the eyes of their followers, despite – or perhaps by virtue of – their wacky logic?”

Eco himself touched on this issue while dealing with the appeal of what he called “the symbolic mode” (1984) and “hermetic semiosis” (1990), two different yet intertwined semiotic devices that we shall not be discussing in this paper, but whose common ground includes, on the one hand, the power they give to whoever claims to hold the key of the alleged hidden agenda of the Supreme Manipulators,³ and on the other, the vagueness (or “nebula of content”) with which such hidden agenda is described. «The strength of a secret lies in its being always announced but never stated. If it were stated it would lose its charm» (Eco 1990: 85). Conspiracy theorists do not usually need to spell out the names of those involved in the alleged Plot, nor do they need to provide a detailed account of their purported actions. They merely hint at the existence of a super-powerful mastermind whose specific identity usually remains implicit. If they were more explicit, they would immediately reveal the weaknesses of their arguments. And they would lose the charisma of the ultimate keepers of a hidden Truth too ominous to be made public.

The attractiveness of conspiracy theories also depends on the fact that, as they oversimplify reality, they make it more manageable from a cognitive and narrative point of view. In times of economic, social and political crisis, many people rightly feel that they are being discarded by a productive system that does not need them anymore. It is difficult to pin down the systemic causes of such an inexorable marginalization. To do so one would have to analyze the complex dynamics that led to the failure of liberal democracies to deliver the promise of a Golden Age of global prosperity. This is why, in the absence of alternative political proposals (after all, as Mark Fisher 2009 aptly pointed out, the last thirty years of our history have been lived under the shadow of

³ Eco seems reluctant to consider the reverse hypothesis (that of Nietzsche), namely that it is power that ipso facto holds the key to the “correct” interpretation.

the Thatcherian motto “There Is No Alternative”), Conspiracy Theories attract more and more followers: a simplistic explanation is better than no explanation at all. The question that Conspiracy theories pretend to answer is: Who is responsible for all this? No need to grapple with the ambiguities and contradictions of an apparently acephalous productive System that is excluding you while asking you to consume its products and comply with its basic assumptions (for example the idea that the globalized market is the solution, rather than the source of your problems). A linear narrative that exploits the political and communicative drift towards hyper-moralized binary structures will also do the job. Obviously, it will not solve any of the real problems that most dispossessed people are struggling with, but it does offer them some kind of symbolic compensation, insofar as it diverts their legitimate frustrations onto imaginary enemies (cfr. Chevalier 1988).

Finally, why are such enemies so often identified with the Jews? To provide an adequate answer one would have to retrace the whole history of modern antisemitism, from its Christian anti-Judaic roots to the present day, a task well beyond the scope of this paper. Let us limit ourselves to a quintessential remark that Umberto Eco wrote in *The Prague Cemetery*: «People believe in what they already know» (Eco 2010: 96). An immense repository of words and images (see Levis Sullam 2008) has encrusted the sememe “Jew” with layers of disparaging representations, most of which revolve around the complex terms of the Greimasian square of veridiction. In Nineteenth and Twentieth century antisemitic propaganda, the recurring isotopy was that of the Jewish Traitor or Double Agent: [in Fascist Antisemitic propaganda] «the opposition between Truth and Falsehood is emphasized, with its complementary terms of Secret and Lie: the false converts, the Jewish mask, the ambushed Jew, the clandestine Jew, and so on. Jews are never who they appear to be. Jew hide, disguise, camouflage themselves. But they don’t do so to protect themselves from persecution. Behind the mask of the poor victims, Jews plot their revenge» (Pisanty [2006] 2016: 265).

In the light of the depth and extension of the anti-Jewish archive, it is no surprise that such stock representations should be the first to be called up when a diabolical antagonist is needed to saturate the empty gaps of the conspiracy narrative. The interference with more recent representations that derive from the Middle Eastern conflict (where the stereotype of the belligerent Israeli Jew doesn’t fit with that of the Holocaust Victim) makes the whole rhetorical device even more convoluted, and yet – as we have seen – when the underlying isotopy is that of Falsehood and Disguise, contradictions between incompatible representations are not an obstacle for those who believe that the world is secretly governed by a cabal of super-powered criminals: quite the opposite, they are perceived as the ultimate confirmation of the beliefs’ hidden truth.

2. The Soros Myth

Against the backdrop of the general logic and rhetoric of conspiracy theories, an analysis of the Soros Myth will provide some additional perspective to the question of what makes such constructions attractive to the eyes of their

followers. One major factor that has so far been largely neglected by most semiotic analyses, insofar as it seems to fall beyond their self-imposed disciplinary boundaries, is the initiative of empirical (real) social actors who exploit the abovementioned cultural tendencies to further their specific agendas.⁴

Many conspiracy theories (or fantasies) would remain in suspension, dispersed or pushed to the outskirts of the semiosphere, if they were not intercepted and instrumentalized by individuals or groups who frame them in a seemingly authoritative discourse whose *force de frappe* goes beyond the efficacy of their narrative and rhetorical strategies. How do we account for the difference between a conspiracy fantasy that circulates among the many weirdos who populate the net, and the same fantasy fabricated and/or intentionally disseminated by a powerful institutional source? Indeed, many conspiracy fantasies spring from real plots, only the actual plotters are not the alleged conspirators but those who accuse them of conspiring. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* prove this point rather well. The Soros Myth is another textbook example. The story of its genesis has been told by Hannes Grassegger on *Buzzfeed* (20th January 2019) and, though I haven't cross-checked all the article's references, I haven't yet encountered a refutation of its factual claims, which makes me reasonably comfortable in believing that there aren't any serious objections to Grassegger's account.

The facts: in 2008 Viktor Orbán asked Benjamin Netanyahu for advice on which political consultants he should hire to help him win the forthcoming Hungarian presidential elections. Netanyahu put him in touch with his own advisers, Arthur Finkelstein and George Eli Birnbaum, two American Jews who had helped him win the 1996 Israeli Elections against Shimon Peres, and since then had become Likud's chief consultants. Finkelstein and Birnbaum, whose political clientele leaned decidedly towards the right (Finkelstein had previously worked for Nixon and Reagan), were famous for their aggressive style of campaigning. Their speciality was the demonisation of political opponents, based on the premise that, out of fear, people tend to vote *against* rather than *for* specific candidates. When such methods were used against the Hungarian Socialist party, the 2010 election was won easily. But four years later all of Fidesz's political adversaries had been neutralised (Jobbick on the right and the Socialists on the left) and were too obviously weak to play the part of Hungary's Enemy Number One. So when it came to setting up the campaign for Orbán's re-election, Finkelstein and Birnbaum had to find a suitable alternative.

Apparently, it was Finkelstein who had the brilliant idea: George Soros was the perfect villain. He was, admittedly, an eminent Hungarian-born (now naturalised American) philanthropist whose Open Society Foundation had supported the anti-Communist opposition before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and over the years had financed school meal programmes for children, founded a

⁴ Recent semiotic theory has begun to come to terms with the issue of political agency, which may of course be translated in actantial and modal terms, but needs to be integrated with other, less immanent methodological approaches in order to improve our understanding of the dynamics of such complex social phenomena. To put it bluntly: certain things don't "just happen"; somebody makes them happen.

University in Budapest, promoted liberally oriented cultural papers and even sponsored scholarships for 15,000 Hungarian students abroad, including Viktor Orbán, who read philosophy at Oxford.

But Soros was also a famous financial speculator, «the man who broke the Bank of England», whose Quantum fund had brought the British and Italian currencies to their knees in 1992 and had repeated the trick in Asia in 1997. His capacity to monitor and exploit financial super-bubbles was legendary; a legend that Soros himself liked to bolster with his Popperian “reflexivity theory” on self-fulfilling prophecies (Soros 2010 and 2015). At the same time he was an outspoken critic of the classic theory of market fundamentalism, namely the concept of the “invisible hand”, while advocating “new rules to control capital movements” that called for a new, fairer world order. Was there a contradiction here? Not according to Soros who, in his 2010 lectures at the Central European University he himself had founded, proposed to separate people’s self-interest as market players from their public interests as political actors, just like he had done in his own small way.

Not just that. Soros was also an arch-adversary both of Bush’s (and later Trump’s) Republican Party in the US and of Putin’s regime in Russia, as well as a critic of Israel’s domestic and foreign policies (and, later, of the Xi Jinping regime in China). This won him overt hostility from all sides, also due to the Open Society’s capillary involvement in the promotion of civil right movements all over the world – and especially in Eastern European countries, whose liberal elites Soros generously funded, according to selective criteria based on the counselling of his trusted local experts, as well as his own political hunches. His approach was that of a “stateless statesman”, as he defined himself, a “deus ex machina” (also his words, as reported by the *NY Times* 3.4.1994)⁵ powerful enough to be able to impinge on world politics through the strategic re-distribution of the huge profits he had accumulated through his hedge-funding activities.

And, of course, he was a Jew. All the facets of his persona would have remained in suspension (just as they do in chemical mixtures in which the solute particles don’t dissolve) if it hadn’t been for the last, crucial ingredient. Had he not been a Jew, we would now be discussing the ambiguous role of capitalist philanthropy in contemporary society. But Soros’s family history was in itself an adventurous plot that he had discussed with the press many times since the 1992 Bank of England affair. Soros’s father was deported to Siberia during World War I but managed to escape and return to his family in Budapest, where they all lived in relative economic ease until the Nazi occupation of 1944, during which they were able to survive thanks to false identity documents that also allowed them to save other Hungarian Jews. All in all, a “euphoric experience” of survivorship, as Soros described it in his first 2010 lecture: «We were on the side of the angels, and we triumphed against overwhelming odds».⁶

⁵ <<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/03/magazine/george-soros.html>>.

⁶ <<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/9ae17912-2262-4646-8ffc>>; <doi1af-c934c36/george-soros-general-theory-of-reflexivity-transcript.pdf>.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, therefore, if Finkelstein and Birnbaum picked George Soros as the ideal protagonist of their Hungarian-based conspiracy plot. Even Soros's name (adopted by George's father in 1936 to signify the Esperanto verb "will soar" – the family's original name was Schwartz), as someone remarked, had a sinister ring about it, possibly due to its palindromic structure, or because it reminded some of the evil Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*.

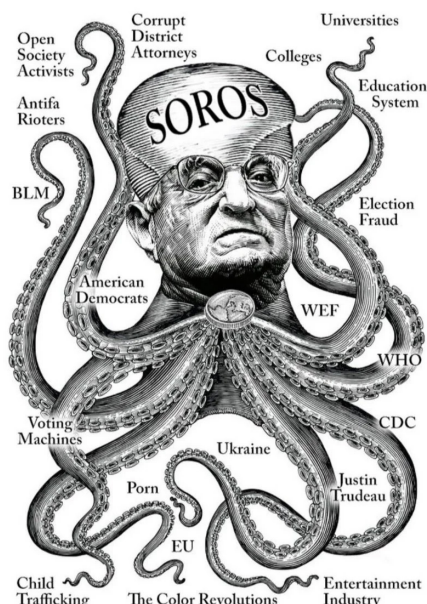
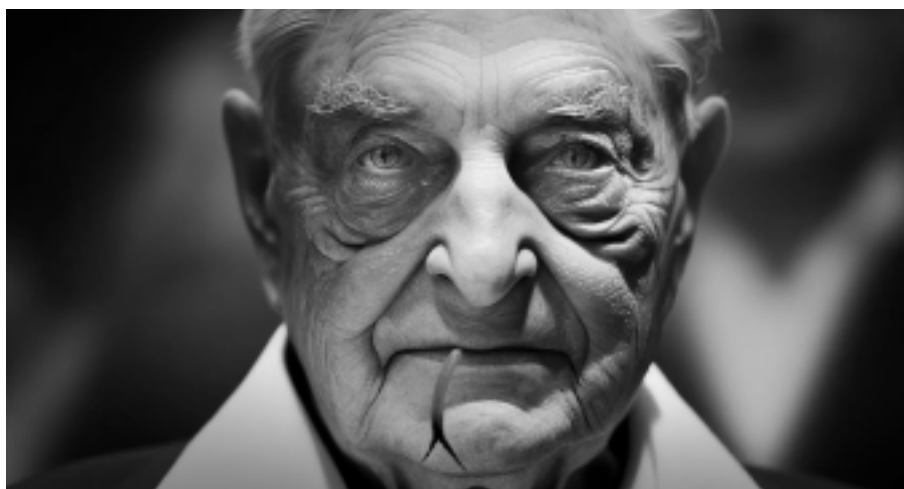
But the reasons, of course, ran much deeper. Let us not forget that, like other Eastern European countries, ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall Hungary had been resolutely pushed by the European Union into a hasty adhesion to the narrative formats of European "cosmopolitan" memory. A memory entirely centred on the sufferings of the Jews, the wickedness of the Nazis and the moral wretchedness of those who witnessed the massacres and stood by without attempting to help the victims, or even collaborated with the perpetrators for their own sordid self-interest. Adapting national narratives to the hegemonic European formats proved to be a difficult task, considering the repression and suppression that in the preceding decades had drawn a veil over autochthonous episodes of Antisemitism, while traumatic memories of persecution at the hands of the Nazis before, and by the Soviets afterwards, had yet to be disinterred and publicly processed in their turn. How to represent themselves as victims of Nazi crimes and Soviet oppression, and at the same time not only acknowledge the primacy of Jewish suffering over their own, but also admit to having contributed to it to some degree? (cfr. Pisanty 2020).

In the countries most affected by such contradictions – Hungary being one of them – the construction of national memories compatible with European requirements met with considerable resistance and sometimes rekindled antisemitic resentments. Now the Soros conspiracy myth offered a relief valve. Latent antisemitic sentiments could finally be aimed at a living, iconic "survivor" figure who seemed to epitomise the stereotype of the duplicitous, power-hungry, manipulative, hypocritical Jew, the fake universalist who feigns concern for the downtrodden while secretly hoarding the enormous resources he needs to conquer the world, or whatever it is that conspirators are supposed to want to do. Exactly the same allegations that were directed against assimilated Jews before the war, they constitute the core feature of the most insidious kinds of antisemitic discourse.

Rumours about Soros's secret manoeuvres to control the world economy had already been circulating since the 1990s, both in right-wing antisemitic circles and among the many economic victims of Black Wednesday (in a TV interview back in the 1990s Bettino Craxi called him a "shark" and suggested that Soros was backed by influential inter-governmental agencies).⁷ Finkelstein and Birnbaum didn't invent anything. They just assembled pieces that were already there, true to the principle that «people believe in what they know already».

For most people Soros stood for unscrupulous Turbo-Capitalism, Wall Street, the Market, Globalism. Some saw him as the embodiment of Socialism

⁷ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsXIm5NeC50>>.



A selection of Soros memes.

Sources: <<https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/ne-konspirace/118125/je-george-soros-jester-kdyz-je-vznik-konspiracni-teorie-zajimavejsi-nez-samotna-konspiracni-teorie.html>>, <https://www.reddit.com/r/forwardsfromgrandma/comments/15klp8a/soros_is_behind_literally_everything/?rdt=49417>; <<https://medium.com/arc-digital/the-legend-of-sorobux-9823d244ccd2>>.

(Communism in sheep's clothing), others of the Elite (Trilateral, Deep State, etc.), perhaps of both, or of something else altogether, possibly the Devil himself. Of course, these representations were contradictory (how can someone be a symbol of Communism and Capitalism at the same time?), but internal inconsistency has never troubled those who embrace a xenophobic mentality and, besides, the *Protocols* had already explained the instrumental role of Communism in the Elders' diabolical plan (Protocol III).⁸

⁸ Protocol III: «Nowadays, with the destruction of the aristocracy, the people have fallen into the grips of merciless money-grinding scoundrels who have laid a pitiless and cruel yoke upon the necks of the workers. We appear on the scene as alleged saviours of the worker from this oppression when we propose to him to enter the ranks of our fighting forces – Socialists, Anarchists, Communists – to whom we always give support in accordance with an alleged brotherly rule (of the solidarity of all humanity) of our SOCIAL MASONRY».



Another selection of Soros memes.
Sources: <<https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2021-12-16/ty-article/premium/fox-news-removes-soros-puppet-master-cartoon-following-adl-complaint/000017f-eb9f-d-3be-ad7f-fbbfce090000>>; <<https://imgflip.com/i/3l392d>>; <<https://kurier.plus/en/node/507>>.

While lumping together the whole incongruous archive, Orbán’s consultants took advantage of the tectonic folds that ran through Soros’s own self-narrative⁹ and, more generally, the liberal-democratic narrative according to which equality and social justice may be brought about by enlightened elites. In so doing they reframed perfectly legitimate objections (why should a private citizen have the means and opportunity of implementing his own geopolitical agenda, no matter how progressive and open-minded that agenda may be?) in terms of age-old stereotypes that are far easier to grasp.

The numerous Internet memes that depict Soros in zoomorphic form – as a spider, as an octopus, as a vulture, as a reptile, etc. – are directly derived from the classic anti-Jewish tropes, in a bid to rekindle a sense of physical revulsion

⁹ «In the course of my life I have developed a conceptual framework that has helped me to make money as hedge fund manager and also to spend money as a policy-oriented philanthropist...» (Soros [2010] 2011: 3).

towards the alien elements that allegedly eat away at the moral integrity of an unsuspecting community from within, or – alternatively – asphyxiate it with their sprawling tentacles. Connotations of decay, rapacity, bloodthirstiness, etc. – part and parcel of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century antisemitic propaganda – are unequivocally reproduced in the epigonic manifestations of that same sentiment and constitute the deep-seated core of the most virulent forms of anti-Jewish conspiracy plots.

At the same time, over- and undertones of duplicity, deception and hypocrisy – other leitmotifs of the classic antisemitic repertoire – are unimaginatively conveyed through the stock image of the shifty-eyed puppet master who lurks in the dark to manipulate the whole course of world history. Another recurring suggestion is the old racist idea that that Jews are primarily responsible for the “bastardization” of the Western world. Under the pretext of fighting for the civil rights of various ethnic minorities, they allegedly encourage hybridizations between different groups (while making sure that their own is kept pure via strictly endogamic policies), thus intentionally contributing to polluting the “pure blood” and ideals of Western civilization (see Pisanty 2006).

Of course, in the 21st century only a (growing) minority of hard-boiled nostalgic Nazi-Fascists would overtly agree with all these slanderous charges. But the aim of many racist Internet memes is precisely to evoke such vicious allegations without taking full responsibility for their consequences, also thanks to the well-known “lulz” mechanism described by the American Neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin in 2016 (and analysed by Pisanty 2020: 207-220):

Generally, when using racial slurs it should come across as half-joking—like the racist joke everyone laughs at because it’s true. [...] The tone should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred. The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor—I am a racist making fun of stereotypes of racists because I don’t take myself super seriously. This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kikes. But that’s neither here nor there. (Anglin 2016)

The ambiguity is intentional: one never knows who might slip from the pseudo-humorous mode to an outright racist stance. Overall, this apparently ironic double-coding makes sure that the whole archive of racial slurs is rescued from its post-war cultural latency, and once again made available to those who feel they might find some use for it.

Let’s go back to our story. Catalysed by the 2008 financial crisis, the waves of immigration in both Europe and the United States, soaring unemployment, the fear of global catastrophes, and all the structural causes that traditionally pave the way for racist movements and parties, the Soros Myth exploded in the 2010s, also thanks to the technical possibilities offered by the Internet (viralisation, anonymity, disintermediation, etc.). Again, the trend was anything but spontaneous. In 2006 David Horowitz and Richard Poe published *The Shadow Party*, an apparently academic study on the hidden connections between “radical” leftist politics and the top echelons of global finance, in

which Soros was described as «the architect and guiding genius of the Shadow Party», «the “Lenin” behind [a secret] revolution» whose primary aim was to undermine American Unity, «deny America its nationhood, character and culture», mobilise terrorist armies against the West and «end ... the era of America’s dominance in global affairs».

The word *conspiracy* ran through the text, although no explicit mention was made about Soros’s Jewishness (in fact, one of the chapters dealt with the tycoon’s alleged antisemitism on account of his advocating «policies whose execution would surely result in Israel’s destruction»). It was up to the readers to activate the implicit connotations of the subtext. On the one hand, the “self-hating Jew” leitmotif, on the other the stereotype of the “callous schemer”, moved by an atavistic desire to prey on Gentile ingenuousness.

By 2016, thanks to the power boost that Finkelstein and Birnbaum had given to the myth, not just Infowars, Breitbart, and other radical right-wing platforms, but also Fox News, various members of the Trump administration (including Rudolph Giuliani and Trump himself), and just about every ultra-nationalist leader in Europe were busy spreading leaks and memes about Soros’s alleged machinations against America, Europe and the Free World, while grafting the Soros Myth onto other portions of the collective conspiratorial imagination. One of the most successful implants in Europe was the Soros-Kalergi “Great Replacement”/ “white genocide” narrative (cfr. Camus 2011), another evergreen in antisemitic propaganda, considering that – as we have seen – the subtlest manoeuvres attributed to Liberal Jews since Fascist times (at least) include their alleged promotion of anti-racist, inclusive societies in order to inoculate the West with impure blood and/or ways of life.

The idea that Soros was the mastermind behind African migrations to Europe was at the centre of the rhetoric employed by Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni and several deputies with Italy’s Five Star movement in 2016, at a time when migration policies were very much on the Italian political agenda. Regarding this popular variant of the Soros Myth, it would be interesting to analyse the slippery argumentative slope that such slanderous claims involve. While it may be acceptable to discuss whether it is in the global market’s interest to eliminate frontiers and open national communities to a totally mobile labour force (in order to keep labour costs down), it is unreasonable to suggest that the global labour market, with all its many faults, is the result of a deliberate strategy aimed at undermining the Western way of life. The essence of this rhetorical operation is a shift from functionalist arguments to intentionalist ones (which imply a master plan): this is how the idea of a conspiracy takes root.

3. Provisional Conclusions

Time to draw some provisional conclusions. First, the problem obviously is not so much the fact that George Soros, a powerful man who can definitely look after himself, has been targeted by a growing number of other influential social actors. The real problem is that, through the Soros Myth, fragments of the antisemitic archive have been redeemed from latency and have begun to circulate, not just in marginal fringes of right-wing culture, but in main-

stream discourse as well. It is astonishing that Netanyahu himself promoted this radically antisemitic narrative, pointing to Soros as a Public Enemy: to promote the immediate interests of his government he jeopardised the safety of diasporic Jews, reawakening ancient prejudices that in the past were used by Hitler himself to justify the genocide.

Secondly, what kind of complex agency is at work in the story we have been telling? On the one hand, there is a network of individual subjects – Orbán, Netanyahu, Finkelstein, Birnbaum, Salvini, Meloni, etc. – who, each following his or her own particular goal, and each endowed with his or her own political clout, work in concert to rekindle the embers of antisemitic discourse, even though this is not necessarily (or not at all) their primary aim. Be it as it may, their individual actions intersect each other's trajectories, as well as those of a multiplicity of other minor agencies – the many different dispatchers of the Soros myth – in an overall mechanism that seems to have a unitary thrust when observed from afar but loses its orderly pattern when seen from close up. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, we notice a similar discrepancy between the plethora of individual initiatives, conflicting actions, tactic alliances, personal choices, etc., that make up the swarm of the globalized liberal world (with its major and minor actors), and the general trends that this new world disorder is establishing and reinforcing *as if* it pursued some converging goal, even though it is impossible to hold any single individual or group, no matter how powerful, entirely responsible for those trends. Indeed, some of the more influential protagonists of the market economy – including Soros – are outspoken critics of the system that they draw abundant benefits from.¹⁰

Which leads to one last question. What is true in conspiracy fantasies? Antisemitic garbage aside, the idea that a very small group of people gets to decide the fate of an impotent and unaware majority is not that ludicrous today. Not, obviously, in the sense of a group of Unknown Superiors who act in secret to divert the course of history, but – much more trivially – of an economic oligarchy that, in the light of day, heavily affects the real lives of global citizens-cum-consumers. Consumers who unwittingly contribute to increasing the power of those same oligarchies each time they surf the net and feed the incessant harvesting of data and metadata necessary for their profiling, thus supporting the system that is gradually pushing them out of all active production and, indeed, out of all forms of real agency, as well as excluding them from the huge profits that these financial giants are making at the expense of the majority. The paradoxical situation that derives from all this is that, while they take it out on the wrong targets, the adepts of conspiracy theories denounce a gradual but inexorable dispossession of agency that they actually have many good reasons to complain about.

How, then, to dismantle the network of false perceptions? By intervening not only on their lopsided logic, but also by formulating realistic, alternative descriptions that are able to explain how current forms of power act on our

¹⁰ See, for example, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/02/opinion/warren-buffett-berkshire-hathaway-social-governance.html>>.

lives – depriving us of resources, work, and the freedom of choice that is not just the choice of what products to consume and what social theories to “like”, knowing full well that our liking or not liking them will make no real difference whatsoever.

The perception of a widespread impotence affecting the majority of people, in contrast with the excessive power of a few, is not in itself wrong. Who are these few and how did they attain – quite legally, and without any need for conspiracies – their dominant position? What is wrong with a global system that promotes their ascent? I have the feeling that, unless we work on this side of the problem too, and if alternative answers to the narrative of the Great Plot are not provided, then no enlightened strategy aimed at deconstructing conspiracy myths will ever be of much use.

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