

# Justifying Conspiracy and Legitimizing Political Violence in Restoration France

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From the French Revolution to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, certain sections of the public have always sought to explain monumental events as the work of a small cabal acting against the general interest. Such conspiracy fears can usually be dismissed as the manifestation of paranoia, but in Restoration France the conspiratorial plot was embraced by certain sections of the Republican left as a tool for political change. This essay will examine some of the ways participants in these conspiratorial movements went on to justify their involvement, arguing that the justifications conspirators put forward in support of their actions slot neatly into the revolutionary left's understanding of political violence and its legitimacy.

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In post-Revolutionary France, as in Europe as a whole, conspiracy, both imagined and real, was a conspicuous element of political culture. From Metternich's fears of a Europe-wide revolutionary conspiracy led by an international *Comité Directeur*, to the fears of a reactionary Jesuit conspiracy expressed by those on the left, politicians seemed to find plots and intrigues almost everywhere they looked.<sup>1</sup> However, it should be remembered that the decades following the fall of Napoleon were marked by genuine attempts by political cabals to remake the European order. Filippo Buonarrotti, for example, harboured pretensions to occupy the role of *Comité Directeur* that so exercised Metternich's fears. While Buonarrotti's pretensions always outstripped reality, his efforts did coincide with plots in a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 42; Geoffrey Cubbitt, *The Jesuit Myth Conspiracy Theory and Politics in nineteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 6.

European countries.<sup>2</sup> In Russia, the Decembrists sought to take advantage of the confusion surrounding the accession of Nicholas I to start an uprising.<sup>3</sup> In the autumn of 1821, a network of secret societies in Spain, formed by radicals who were frustrated with the parliamentary liberals, orchestrated a series of insurrections: events which provided a model of the widespread conspiracies of the Carbonari in Italy.<sup>4</sup> It is from this context of endemic conspiracy and conspiracy fears that the intrigues of the *Charbonnerie française* emerged in the early 1820s.

Understanding conspiracy requires grappling with the complex relationship between conspiratorial plots and conspiracy fear, that is between conspiracy both real and imagined. The former has come to be largely understood in terms of political and social context, *pace* Alan Spitzer's concept of an 'underground republic', which explains subversive political action as the manifestation of subaltern political desires which were denied alternative modes of expression.<sup>5</sup> The latter has been explained primarily in terms of a 'paranoid style' which 'has to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content'.<sup>6</sup> However, as will be seen, there was frequently a certain commonality between the views of historical actors actively engaged in political conspiracy, and those who set out to expose conspiracies that did not exist. For both groups conspiracy was understood as political 'means' (political form and action) whereby the aims of willing human actors, or the 'ends' (political content), were imposed upon the world at large.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the political conspiracy and conspiracy fear have a place in broader debates surrounding radical left wing politics throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is ul-

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<sup>2</sup> E. Eisenstein, *The First Professional Revolutionist: Filippo Michele Buonarroti (1761–1837): A Biographical Essay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Raeff, *The Decembrist Movement* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> M. Rapport, *Nineteenth Century Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 68–9.

<sup>5</sup> Alan B. Spitzer, 'La République Souterraine' in *Le siècle de l'avènement républicain*, ed. by Keith M. Baker, François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Cape, 1966), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Felicks Gross, *The Revolutionary Party: Essays in the Sociology of Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974), p. 53.

timately about the legitimacy of political violence and the possibility of a Revolutionary transformation of society in a given set of circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

As this formulation implies, divergence between conspirators and conspiracy theorists arose not from the term conspiracy itself – for its function is as a means of actualising human will within the political realm – but rather over the legitimacy of insurrectionary violence. Thus a kind of ‘moral economy’ was at work, akin to that which served to justify the violence of food riots stimulated by fears of ‘famine pacts’ during the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Through a reading of a number of writings penned by conspirators in the years following the plots of the Restoration period in France, this essay will examine the intellectual and philosophical justifications that members of the *Charbonnerie française* posited. The justifications offered by these conspirators, the social and intellectual elites of the movement, reveal the elaboration of a theory of political violence through attempts to legitimise conspiratorial action as well as the centrality of the social question in such efforts.

### **Conspiratorial movements and post-Revolutionary political culture**

Many of the political conspiracies of post-Revolutionary France can trace their genesis back to Gracchus Babeuf’s *Société des égaux*, the ‘Conspiracy of Equals.’ Indeed, it has frequently been argued that conspiratorial revolutionaries from the Carbonari, through August Blanqui to Lenin owe a debt to Babeuf, both for the models of organisation he employed and the intellectual arguments in favour of conspiratorial political violence he deployed.<sup>10</sup> Following the fall of Robespierre in 1794, Babeuf sought to build support for a radical continuation of the Terror and the pursuit of equality through his newspaper, *Le tribun du peuple*. Finding little support, and intermittently censored and imprisoned by the government for the views he expressed in *Le tribun*, Babeuf became instrumental in the formula-

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Dieter Groh, ‘The Temptation of Conspiracy, Part II’, in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. by Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (London: Springer-Verlag, 1987), pp. 21–2.

<sup>10</sup> John M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London: Paladin, 1974), p. 246.

tion of an armed insurrection. However, the Government had already infiltrated the cell, and was able to break up the plot with ease, arresting Babeuf and his co-conspirators in May 1796 before they could strike.

The significance of Babeuf's 'conspiracy of equals' lies less in its real world impact, than in the way in which Babeuf sought to legitimate the plot at his trial in the spring of 1797. In justifying his conspiratorial action, Babeuf turned to the thought of Machiavelli: 'developing what would become a philosophy of opposition for generations of activists'.<sup>11</sup> In short, Babeuf legitimated his conspiracy by placing motives at the centre of a moral assessment of human actions, arguing at his trial that an act could only be considered criminal if it displayed criminal intent, and he had simply been seeking to restore the 'natural rights' of the people.<sup>12</sup> For Babeuf, political violence and conspiracy had no inherent moral character; its legitimacy could only be determined by the ends to which it was put.

It was through the subsequent activism and writings of Filippo Buonarroti that Babeuf's conspiracy entered socialist lore. Buonarroti and Babeuf had been imprisoned together when the latter was arrested over his writings in *Le tribun* in 1795. Buonarroti had been influential in convincing Babeuf to turn to conspiracy during their time in prison together, and became one of Babeuf's co-conspirators. Both men were arrested as members of the plot in 1796, but while Babeuf was executed, Buonarroti was imprisoned and then pardoned by Napoleon in 1799. Buonarroti secured the legacy of Babeuf's conspiracy with his book on the subject, published in 1828.<sup>13</sup> During this period Buonarroti attempted to direct international revolutionary conspiracy. One such example is when he incorporated the leaders of local conspiratorial groups into his overarching secret society called the *Sublimes maîtres parfaits*, (later reorganised as *Le Monde*). His 'success was largely formal and meant little in practice', and he seems to have been most effective as a 'populariser of insurgent methods rather than as an active revolutionary'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Mason, 'Never was a Plot so Holy, Gracchus Babeuf and the End of the French Revolution', in *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*, ed. by Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Mason, 'Never was a Plot so Holy', p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, pp. 243–6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338; Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx* (Teddington: Acumen, 2000), p. 30.

More pointed conspiratorial opposition to the restored Bourbons in France also made use of secret societies as cover for their plots, which arose out of Masonic lodges like the *Amis de la vérité*. The disaffected students of this lodge were at the centre of the August 1820 plot in Paris to subvert army units and worked alongside the circle of veterans in Paris called the *Bazar français*, who organised out of a shopping arcade.<sup>15</sup> Following the failure of this plot two young members of the *Amis de la vérité*, Joubert and Dugied, travelled to Italy where they fought in the Neapolitan Revolution. Inducted into the Carbonari, they brought the rituals and organisational forms of the Italian revolutionary sect back to France where they formed the basis of the *Charbonnerie française*.<sup>16</sup>

However, while those pedalling fear of conspiratorial sects asserted that secret societies were intended to indoctrinate their members, as a way of recruiting the naïve and suggestible to sinister causes, the students who participated in them tended to view these societies as a pragmatic form of political organization. Secret societies like the freemasons were not in and of themselves subversive. Not only had they been long established in France, but they were also a significant mode of elite sociability and interaction.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, radical and liberal opposition in France pre-dated the arrival of the *Charbonnerie française*. The appeal of secret societies for political activists lay in their cellular structure, which in theory was supposed to insulate the movement's leadership, rather than in rites and rituals. The functional and pragmatic character of the conspiratorial secret society for the members of the *Charbonnerie française* was underscored by the stripping out of much of the esoteric rite and ritual that characterised the Italian movements.<sup>18</sup> The very appeal of conspiratorial modes of political organisation probably arose not from the forms itself, but

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<sup>15</sup> Alan B. Spitzer, *Old Hatreds and Young Hopes, the French Carbonari against the Bourbon Restoration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 219, 225; Josiane Bourguet-Rouvere, 'Les bonapartistes dans les conspirations de 1815 à 1823' in *Secret et République, 1785-1840*, ed. by Bernard Gainot and Pierre Serna (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascale, 2004), pp. 139-40.

<sup>16</sup> On the organisational structures, rites and rituals of the Italian Carbonari see R. John Rath 'The Carbonari: Their Origins, Initiation Rites and Aims', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 69, no. 2 (Jan., 1984), pp. 353-370.

<sup>17</sup> James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> François-André Isambert, *De la Charbonnerie au Saint-Simonisme, étude sur la jeunesse de Buchez* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1966), p. 99.

from the narrowly repressive character of restoration politics, without which conspiracy might not have been seen as a necessary method of pursuing political goals.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, the *Charbonnerie* cannot be understood by simply distilling their ends to conspiratorial means – their aims and ambitions originated from outside the structures of the secret society. Such societies represented a means through which a variety of potential ends found expression. As Spitzer's concept of an 'underground republic' implies, these ends, be they liberal, bonapartist, or republican, could only be expressed through the mediation of furtive means. Significantly, Napoleon's image was often affixed to Carbonaro symbolism, for example in medals depicting him with the Carbonaro dagger.<sup>20</sup> In order to comprehend conspiracy during the period, one must therefore understand the subaltern political desires it expressed. It is apparent that increasing disregard for constitutionalism on the part of the government forced many opposition and liberal politicians into taking a more militant stance. Indeed, many of the authors of plots during the period 1820–23 cited the law of the double vote as a 'decisive violation of the constitutional game'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the militant and conspiratorial opposition of liberal deputies was ensured by this move. For example, in a letter of the 22 February, shortly before the electoral reforms began their journey through the chamber of deputies Lafayette spoke of 'wise and firm resistance'.<sup>22</sup> Lafayette's use of the term 'resistance' is certainly significant, for it connotes legitimate extra-legal action in a way 'conspiracy' does not. However, the question arises as to why this resistance came to be seen as necessary. What made this violation of the Charter unacceptable?

Whether conceived as resistance or conspiracy, this opposition necessitated a conceptual framework to legitimate it. However, as Spitzer's concept of the underground republic implies, the legacy of the French Revolution rendered political power ambiguous and revo-

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<sup>19</sup> Spitzer, 'République Souterraine', p. 358.

<sup>20</sup> Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta Publications, 2005), p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Spitzer, *Old Hatreds*, p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> Sylvia Neely, *Lafayette and the Liberal Ideal 1814–1824: Politics and Conspiracy in an Age of Reaction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 134.

lutionary action problematic.<sup>23</sup> Natural law, reason, and the rights of man that had underpinned political action during the revolution, no longer provided a satisfactory basis for legitimate political action. The association of these principles with Jacobinism and revolutionary violence made it necessary for precisely the kinds of people who were involved in opposition against the monarchy to formulate a new basis for rights, and for political action. One of the major sources for this reformulation was, as Cheryl Welch has argued, the utilitarianism of the *Idéologues*. As she states, the tarnished appeal of the language of natural rights raised ‘the problem of finding an ultimate justification for political and social action’.<sup>24</sup> As a result, *Idéologue* thinkers such as Destutt de Tracy insisted on the ‘necessarily mutable and relative nature of rights’, derived from their utility in fulfilling the physiological needs of individuals in society.<sup>25</sup> The philosophical arguments developed by ideologues such as Tracy were ‘crucial to the articulation of radical political dissent during the restoration,’ for they represented an attempt to move beyond the rhetorical language of natural rights which had been tarnished by association with the Jacobin Terror to justify radical and republican political projects.<sup>26</sup>

### Justifying conspiracy in *Paris Révolutionnaire*

The collection of essays by former members of the *Charbonnerie*, entitled *Paris Révolutionnaire*, provides a valuable insight into the political programmes of at least some of the conspirators. In his introduction, the compilation’s editor Godefroy Cavaignac, a former conspirator himself, outlined his vision of ‘la force révolutionnaire’ in terms strikingly similar to those utilised by the *Idéologues*.<sup>27</sup> Of course, these justifications were necessarily given after the fact, and no doubt reflected not only two decades of rumination on the subject, but also the requirements of a public statement in their cogency. Yet they provide considered arguments in favour of conspiratorial revolution and cohere with the ideas of the *Idéologues* associated with conspirators such as Lafayette and Voyer d’Argenson.<sup>28</sup> However, their real

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<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Welch, *Liberty and Utility: The French Idéologues and the Transformation of Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 161.

<sup>24</sup> Welch, *Liberty and Utility*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Spitzer, *Old Hatreds*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Welch, *Liberty and Utility*, p. 155.

significance lies in the elaboration of a theory of political action that legitimised political violence and conspiracy. Cavaignac began by outlining a ‘moral law’ or maxim by which posterity should judge the actions of the present generation by their results. Accordingly, the question that must be answered in order to formulate action with moral force (i.e. legitimate means) is how to achieve progress. The answer given is that a ‘revolutionary force’ has to be unleashed, for ‘it is to this deadly law that we owe, at least, the revolutionary force, by which I mean the reaction of man against evil, by his intelligence, his virtue and his actions’.<sup>29</sup> Thus utility is established as a criterion for the assessment of progress and therefore legitimate. Moral action, as was made explicit later in Cavaignac’s tract, ‘[c]onsidered in its first cause, progress is suffering, felt, hated, fought; in its causes and general means, it is the very physiology of man, reacting through his own morality, needs and strengths’.<sup>30</sup> Cavaignac subscribed to a physiological analysis of human activity akin to that propounded by the ideologues during the Napoleonic period. The motor of progress was *physiologie* — man’s desire to fulfil his natural needs. The means to this end were his ‘intelligence’, ‘virtue’ and ‘activity’, and the measure of progress is the fulfilment of these natural desires.

This functional view of progress was contrasted with religion, since, in Cavaignac’s words, ‘Religions, notably the Christian religion, make man a fallen being, subjected to an original debasement still taking its course’.<sup>31</sup> It was only by rejecting religion and the doctrine of Original sin that humanity ‘arrived at the doctrine of his own perfectibility’.<sup>32</sup> Therefore a significant divergence was apparent between the view of human nature put forward by individuals like Cavaignac and those like Guizot, who criticised the ideologues in 1836 for failing to acknowledge ‘that men were evil, that they needed religion’.<sup>33</sup> Thus the *Charbonnerie* articulated a profoundly different view of political power to liberals like Guizot as well as conservatives like Joseph de Maistre who asserted that the authority of throne and altar was required to abrogate the excesses of mankind’s fallen nature. Instead, Cavaignac maintained that mankind was perfectible,

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<sup>29</sup> Godefroy Cavaignac, ‘La force révolutionnaire’, in *Paris Révolutionnaire*, ed. by Godefroy Cavaignac (Paris, 1848), p. 6. Quotations from French language sources have been translated by the author.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Welch, *Liberty and Utility*, p. 187.

and that it was quite legitimate to fulfil physical needs, which were attributed to nature (i.e. the physiological qualities of humanity) rather than man's fallen state.

This conception of human nature which gave material necessity moral point, and therefore legitimacy to the means that fulfilled it, became the basis of an argument against the current organization of society and politics. It was held that current social and political forms were incongruent with these natural and legitimate ends, as was evident in the hostility of workers to the introduction of machinery that ostensibly should have increased productive forces and therefore been in the general interest of everyone:

Without question this hatred of the worker for machinery is neither natural, nor wise, but that does not mean that it is without motive [...] he misunderstands the true cause of the wrong that they do him, and that this cause goes back to a social state that itself is blind and against nature.<sup>34</sup>

In this formulation, progress, derived from the notion that human action was driven by material needs, becomes central to a critique of existing social and political forms. In this case, social differentiation resulting from the distribution of productive economic gains was decried as irrational, because it drove workers to oppose the improved means of production that should in theory have served workers' physiological needs and improved their standards of living. The workers' 'unnatural' hatred for machines was 'not without motive'. However, because the 'social state' of workers was unnatural, their attempts to pursue their natural needs were directed against the very tools that should have helped them do just that.

This logical progression from a theoretical conception of human nature to social and political critique, unified means and ends, whereby political means are implied by theoretical ends:

What we have said of the vices of the social order applies to the political system, which has shared and amplified them. We will see elsewhere how it can repair the wrong that it

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<sup>34</sup> Cavaignac, 'La force révolutionnaire', p. 19.

has done to men, how it can serve equality, after having been in permanent conspiracy against it.<sup>35</sup>

Political actions therefore became a function of legitimate ends however they are defined. As a result, because Cavaignac extrapolated legitimacy from 'human nature', he was able to justify conspiratorial action as legitimate even if it seemingly contradicted the desires of the majority. For Cavaignac, the status quo itself was the 'conspiracy' (*conjuraton*), for it served the interests of a small minority at the expense of the great majority. In his view, active resistance and conspiracy against the current organisation of politics was legitimate, because up until that point, politics had 'conspired' against the true needs and interests of society and against the law of progress based upon increasing the general fulfilment of the needs of society:

If revolutions waited for the sign of the majority, patience would be needed. Their moral sentiment is easy to deceive; their interests mean they suffer this patience rather than gain. If majorities do not support them, if they do not profit from them at all, revolutions are impossible, immoral. But minorities always anticipate. Parties are the forerunners of the masses. When they serve them they can, they must, pre-empt them.<sup>36</sup>

Conspiracy and revolution as means, even if they contradicted the professed will of the majority of public opinion, therefore followed logically from legitimate and clear ends to be attained.

In the same volume another ex-carbonaro, Ulysse Trélat, gave an account of the conspiracies, which displayed a similar preoccupation with justifying means through ends. This was most notable in his caustic description of the conduct of the authorities attempting to curb conspiratorial activities, as well as their use of *agents provocateurs*. This attitude coalesced around the capture of Lieutenant-Colonel Caron, who had been associated with the August 1820 rising centred on the *Bazar français*. According to Trélat, Caron's capture by sub-officer Thiers (brother of Adolphe Thiers, the historian and future minister under the July Monarchy) was accomplished by a particularly nefarious episode of entrapment. Following the arrest of a

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<sup>35</sup> Cavaignac, 'La force révolutionnaire', p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

number of his co-conspirators, Caron formulated a plan to rescue his allies from the clutches of the executioner. When the strength of public feeling towards the conspirators became clear and it seemed that they would be released as a result, Caron was disposed to abandon his rescue plan. However, Thiers persuaded Caron to act nonetheless, promising to carry his uniform and gird his blade: 'Colonel, it is I who shall carry your uniform and your helmet to the rendezvous; it is I who shall gird your sword'.<sup>37</sup> The two embraced as comrades in arms, yet Thiers' dissimilitude was such that even during this display of mutual affection and loyalty 'his hand searched for his whistle to make use of it'.<sup>38</sup> However, it is not the verisimilitude of Trélat's brief digression into morality plays which concerns us here. But, more importantly, the heroic actions and motives of the conspirator were juxtaposed with the disdainful actions of the *agent provocateur*, for whom 'it was a way of shedding blood, and with this blood, positions or advancement because it is thus that one then obtained the favour of power'.<sup>39</sup> Through the condemnation of particular actions, we are returned to Cavaignac's attack on the character of the government's exercise of political power as a 'conjunction' against the true interests of the polity and the laws of progress – for it was the self-interest of Thiers that rendered his entrapment of Caron so repugnant.

Following the fall of the restored Bourbon monarchy, the members of the *Charbonnerie* subsequently pursued wildly divergent courses. As Spitzer points out, the first three ministers of justice, an interior minister, and various other officials of the July Monarchy emerged from their ranks.<sup>40</sup> Many others, such as Bazard and Buchez, turned to the socialism of system builders such as the Saint-Simonians. Under the July Monarchy, Godefroy Cavaignac was to become a member of the Republican *Société des amis du peuple*, which after 1830 was able to ride the crest of the new-found respectability enjoyed by republicanism after the fall of the Bourbons.<sup>41</sup> This society reunited numerous ex-Carbonari including Buchez, and most significantly, Auguste Blanqui, who largely carried the flag for conspiratorial insurrection during the 1830s. Blanqui was at the heart of two

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<sup>37</sup> Uylsse Trélat, 'La charbonnerie' in *Paris Révolutionnaire*, ed. by Cavaignac, p. 241.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>40</sup> Spitzer, *Old Hatreds*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 43.

major conspiratorial societies during the July Monarchy – the Society of Families and Society of Seasons. Along with the utopians of his century, and the *philosophes* of the preceding one, Blanqui held faith in the perfectibility of human nature through knowledge and reason.<sup>42</sup> To this however, was added a firm belief in equality, which was evidence not only of the generally acknowledged influence of Buonarroti's relation of Babeuf's conspiracy of equals upon the thought of Blanqui, but also of the rising importance of the social question during the July Monarchy.<sup>43</sup> Blanqui considered the people for whom he fought to be unenlightened, apathetic, or worse credulous and easily misled by those seeking to exploit them. As a result, Blanqui again perceived conspiratorial means as necessary. He conceived of 'an intellectual and political avant-garde' which would lead the people as a general staff until equality had been established and secured.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Blanqui was somewhat isolated in his continued pursuit of political goals through conspiratorial means. In the words of Trélat: 'the time of the *Charbonnerie* and that of the secret societies has passed, at the present time, everyone acts with God as their witness; the most powerful means of action is publicity'.<sup>45</sup> Even Blanqui seemed a veritable paragon of caution during the revolutionary turbulence of 1848, dispersing crowds rather than leading insurrection. Given the failure of his 1839 plot, he was perhaps conscious that such action would never succeed without a truly popular basis.<sup>46</sup> This concern for publicity and public opinion, as we shall see, was reflected in the most public of figures – the conspiratorial exegete. It also rami-fies the pragmatic, utilitarian approach to conspiracy as a means to an end, which emerged from *Paris Révolutionnaire*. Conspiracy could only be justified so long as it would accomplish whatever ends it seemed to warrant. It should therefore not be surprising to find former conspirators turning to a variety of other political pursuits after the failure of the *Charbonnerie* and its plots. As Isser Woloch has observed, 'around the issue of violence, then, the distinction between reform and revolution would appear obvious; yet from a slightly dif-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Tony Denholm, 'Louis Auguste Blanqui, the Hamlet of Revolutionary Socialism' in *Intellectuals and Revolution: Socialism and the Experience of 1848*, ed. by Eugene Kamenka and Francis B. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui*, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> Trélat, 'La charbonnerie', p. 217.

<sup>46</sup> Denholm, 'Louis Auguste Blanqui', p. 26.

ferent perspective it can disappear before one's eyes'.<sup>47</sup> In this way, the perceived paradox between insurrectionary and conspiratorial means and democratic or liberal ends is resolved in the theories and action of the conspirators themselves.

### **Conspiracy and the 'Paranoid Style'**

This relationship of means to ends which seemingly justified conspiracy in the eyes of some contemporaries can be put into perspective by the fears others held of these conspiracies. A formative influence on conspiracy fears during the nineteenth century was unquestionably the trope of conspiracy theories that attributed the French Revolution to the activities of freemasons and secret societies. Originating in the works of the Abbé Barruel and John Robison during the late 1790s, these tracts were strongly counter-enlightenment in orientation. Robison assailed the Freemasons and other secret societies as 'corruptors of the public mind in France', implicitly deriding the notion of a public sphere within which truth, or the 'general interest' can be distilled through rational discussion.<sup>48</sup> It was replaced with the notion of a public mind, as fallible as that of any individual, which required 'the vigilance and exertions of magistrates, and of moral instructors, to prevent the spreading of licentious principles and maxims of conduct'.<sup>49</sup> Conspiratorial explanations of the French Revolution therefore attempted to strip it of legitimacy by highlighting a supposed contradiction between means and ends. The Revolution was not, as the Revolutionaries claimed, an expression of the general will, but rather that of the pernicious sects who had orchestrated the downfall of the old order by manipulating public opinion against it.

An apparent contradiction arose here between public-oriented form (the anti-conspiratorial inquisition) and public-wary content (wherein restrictions on freedom of expression are consistently urged in order to protect the easily led public). This can only be satisfactorily understood in terms of the nature of conspiracy theory and its relationship to broader intellectual trends. Gordon Wood, in his essay on the subject, claims that conspiratorial thinking in the eight-

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<sup>47</sup> Isser Woloch, 'Introduction' in *Revolution and the Meanings of Freedom in the nineteenth century*, ed. by Isser Woloch (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> John Robison, *Proofs of a conspiracy against all the religions and Governments of Europe* (London, 1798), p. 54.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

eenth century represented a primitive mode of causal explanation, arising from the 'underlying metaphysics' of contemporary culture.<sup>50</sup> As older modes of historical explanation and understanding (such as fortune and divine intervention), which placed events beyond the purview of human control declined in influence, the Enlightenment notion of scientific 'cause and effect' took their place.<sup>51</sup> In order to retain the concept of 'free will' so central to Western Christianity, human agency was identified as an historical cause, and the discrepancy between declared action and effect was explained by dissimulation. Thus conspiracy theories originate from 'the assumption of one great and general antithesis, Good versus Evil, Right versus Wrong,' and the perceived danger of secret societies and conspiracy therefore rests on an assumption that 'they are up to no good'.<sup>52</sup> There are parallels here between the justifications provided by the conspirators, insofar as moral notions of right and wrong derived from a notion of humanity's nature (this time tied up with notions of original sin) provide criteria by which actions can be judged. In this sense, the public exposure of a conspiracy theory can be squared with an attack on public politics itself so long as it serves 'right' means.

Of course the paranoid style was not exclusively a weapon of the right. Indeed, the left had its own version which was particularly prominent during the nineteenth century: the Jesuit myth. Like the aforementioned conspiracy theory, this myth found myriad expressions in the nineteenth century, often with differing political and philosophical implications. Some of the best-known examples of this could be found in the works of Eugene Sue and the diatribes unleashed by Michelet and Quinet in April 1843. The anti-Jesuits made use of imagery related to disease, as well as representations related to animalism, light and dark. As Geoffrey Cubitt argues, these groups of images underline the key concerns of anti-Jesuits: principally the existence of an irreducible moral conflict between good and evil.<sup>53</sup> Anti-Jesuitism must be understood in the context of opposition to the post-revolutionary conservative reaction, which called upon organised religion in an alliance of throne and altar to underpin the exer-

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon S. Wood 'Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style, Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol.39, no.3 (1982), p. 407.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *Mythology*, p. 214.

<sup>53</sup> G. Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth, Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 187.

cise of political power.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, controversy over the Jesuits tended to be conflated with controversy over education and thus raised the question of whether education should be secular or religious and whether it should create good Frenchmen or good Catholics.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, just as with conspiratorial interpretations of revolutionary action, and indeed conspiracies themselves, it was conflicting visions of the ideal political polity, and therefore of the legitimate use of state power and role of the state, that were at stake.

This was a prominent feature wrought large in the work of Johannes Wit, a man who was both conspirator and informant, and whose sensational evidence proved grist to the mill for governments already terrified of conspiratorial plots.<sup>56</sup> In his writing, Wit was explicitly concerned with justifying the morality of his actions. Wit claimed that he had only joined the secret societies in their conspiracies because, recruited as a young and impressionable student, he had been duped into supporting their actions.<sup>57</sup> Even though he now recognised the ‘error’ of his former actions, they nonetheless retain a certain merit, which he justified in a similar way to that of other conspirators: ‘I must however add to the view that I have just given, that my aim was [. . .] to tend not to my own advantage, but to what I considered the mutual advantage of all’.<sup>58</sup> Finally, his moral sanctity was secured by the fact that he volunteered the information, contained in his account to the authorities, even at the expense of his own freedom.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

The conspirators of the *Charbonnerie française*, therefore represented a continuation of republican conspiracy which began with Babeuf, yet reached for new justifications to legitimate their actions based on the utilitarianism of the *Idéologues*, rather than Natural Law. These justifications represented a kind of ‘moral economy’ at work within their thinking, whereby their conspiratorial means could be justified by

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<sup>54</sup> Martyn Lyons, *Post Revolutionary Europe, 1815–56* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 38.

<sup>55</sup> Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth*, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *Mythology*, p. 340.

<sup>57</sup> Johannes Wit, *Les Sociétés Secrètes de France et d’Italie, ou Fragment de ma vie et de mon temps* (Paris, 1830), p. xii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.

their motives, that is to say their much sought-for ends. In this sense we can return to Mannheim's dichotomy between political realities and ideal vision, for the conspiratorial actions of the *Charbonnerie* came to be justified according to a specific conceptualization of the nature of mankind and a corresponding vision of the ideal and legitimate organization of the polity. Thus conspiracy becomes a heroic means by which the human will can impose itself upon reality. It is significant that during The Hundred Days the young Godefroy Cavaignac, then at the Lycée Sainte-Barbe in Paris, was vocal in his support for Bonaparte. This symbolised 'the alignment of many Jacobin republicans with Napoleon after March 1815'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the entire image of Napoleon as 'the champion of liberty' would seem to reflect a strain of heroic republicanism, which when faced with the restored Bourbon monarchy, saw the ultimate end of a republic as sufficient to justify insurrectionary action, just as Babuef had two decades earlier.<sup>61</sup> This view of conspiracy as a means by which human will is imposed upon reality was not peculiar to conspirators, but was shared by the conspiracy theorists who sought to unmask them. Starting from different assumptions on politics they came to different conclusions about the legitimacy of conspiracy. Therefore, in the minds of contemporaries, conspiracy and conspiracy theories represented a locus around which profound controversies over the morality and legitimacy of political power were played out. Essentially both these forms confronted the question, 'when do the ends justify the means?'

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<sup>60</sup> Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.