Paranoid pseudocommunity beliefs in a sect milieu

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Summary. A shared paranoid belief system was identified among members of a sect-like group. The imagined "paranoid pseudocommunity" includes both persecutorial conspiracies and networks extending and supporting the group. Delusional hypotheses are frequently reorganized within this paradigm, as are accompanying verbal styles. A paranoid perceptual and cognitive style is maintained by leader influence, information-processing roles of members, and the dogmatic, insular, elitist, and antagonistic qualities of this encapsulated subculture.

Paranoid delusions seldom find adherents beyond a minority of one. Diagnostic classification reflects this fact by identifying no clinical entity broader than a paranoid dyad. Occasionally, however, larger groups of a sect of cult-like nature are infused with the paranoid ideation of a dominant member. This study examines such a group, the "League of Geniuses" (pseud.), focusing on the relationship between the belief system and a social system that encourages, orders, and maintains it in a "cognitive subculture". Interviews were conducted with a dozen members and ex-members over a period of a decade, and there was a comprehensive review of documents, speeches, and other communications.

The "League of Geniuses", originally a leftist American student group, developed highly unusual grandiose claims and persecutory hypotheses under the direction of its leader and principal theoretician "Victor De Monde" (pseud.). Their theory of social reality may be described by expanding upon the notion of "paranoid pseudocommunity" originally formulated by Norman Cameron (Cameron 1943, 1959a, b). This term is used to denote an imagined persecutorial conspiracy directed at the believer. It functions to focus, externalize, and explain threatening affects within a single, compact projective system. The cosmology of the League, however, also includes imagined supportive and validating networks. Two symmetrically opposed hierarchies are visualized, interacting in scenarios of imagined "pseudoevents". Archenemies at the apexes are phenomenological epicenters, both source and object of that which occurs. Within this unvarying skeletal paradigm, the identity of supporters and enemies changes often, with a hair-trigger fluidity unmatched among religious and sociopolitical dualisms.

Persecutors

Among the enemies of De Monde are real groups invested with unusual attributes, such as a narcotics-running royal family or a world-dominating Knights of Malta, and entities that do not exist at all, such as "The Black Guelphs" and a grouping of murderous ex-members. Apical enemies have been re-named only several times in fourteen years, whereas new hypotheses are continually grafted onto secondary and tertiary echelons. Frequent low-level persecutorial reorganization is related in part to the origin of clues in everyday events. Apartment burglary, unpleasant responses to stridently leafletting members, inoperative pay telephones, and double-parked cars have been processed as manifestations of plotting by the leadership, using infor-
mation supplied by overscanning members. For example, the League “staked out” the apartment of a resignee interviewed for this study. The local, elderly, locksmith who arrived to change her lock was perceived as a spy-agency “controller” of the turncoat assassins, and referred to thereafter as “The White-Haired Man”.

Woman-hating was a precursor of true pseudo-communities. In late 1973, DeMonde excoriated women as “wretched, insane, sadistic”, dominating “pathetic, impotent men”: “the psychotic Mona Lisa smile of the archwitch the Virgin Mary ... the Whore of Babylon, Satan herself.”

This phase coincided with the breakup of a long-standing romantic liaison of De Monde. Her new husband was the kernel of a persecutorial panic, supposed to have arrived from abroad newly “brainwashed” to activate assassins of De Monde. In a highly coercive, three-day “therapy session”, De Monde and others reported convincing the subject that this was the source of psychiatric problems afflicting him. A conclave of members was told of enforced bestiality visited upon the “patient” by persecutors, and of the dangers of as yet undiscovered brainwashees. Organizational activity came to revolve about this scenario. An attempted defector was physically confined until she alerted police by dropping notes from the window. The formal pseudocommunity structure emerged at this time, in 1974, initially involving Rockefellers and mental health agencies, but soon broadening to include trade unions, academic communities, and journalists. Explanatory hypotheses were continually projected into new apparent threat. As Cameron (1959b) noted, “often this kind of self-stimulation spirals upwards, while more and more ‘incidents’ or people may be gathered into the gathering psychotic storm”. In addition to “clues”, actual provocation was frequently employed, a hostile response being confirmatory pyrrhic victory. Members affected a studied belligerence and engaged in verbal and occasional physical violence. Two members authored tracts depicting office colleagues as agents of unlikely, distant persecutors, and female administrators as employed to “emasculate and brainwash men.” The considerable dismay aroused by the appearance of these articles provided confirmatory satisfaction.

During the past fourteen years, four major reorganizations of belief have taken place. Each was preceded by a two month period of fluid, speculative rumination culminating in dramatic discoveries, with a sudden and vastly increased use of enraged, scatological, and sexually pejorative utterances by De Monde. The organization adopts a crisis mode to the exclusion of rest or sleep. Intrapsychic tensions and personal reverses of the leader certainly are contributory, and two crises developed while De Monde was abroad and comparatively alone, threatening “clues” undergoing magnification into alarming proportions. However, an overall examination of documents points as well to an inevitable cycle of “routinization of charisma”, whereby the projective system decays into a humdrum and everyday ideology, diluting a satisfying immediacy and removing a vehicle for cathexis of intense drives. When terror and anger reappear, this requires recapitulation of the entire paranoid sequence culminating in persecutor discovery, and new reactive grandiosity.

Grandiosity

Self-definition advanced by the League have included superlative personal characteristics of the membership (charismatic claims), wielding of great power and influence, and overall centrality in history, “the only chance of humanity to avert annihilation”. Many extra claims have been made for De Monde himself, who evolved in 1974 into the only human capable of “debrainwashing” people into he who enabled members to “master terrifying weapons of psywar” and “produce Promethean geniuses”. A demonic and fearful tone was cultivated: “we shall be cruelly ruthless”, “In Germany I am known as ‘The Abominable One’”.

Claims of intellectual omniscience and omnipotence gradually became the predominant image: “We have reached an intellectual level higher than Albert Einstein (who was) unable to go beyond obvious banality. .. we will change totally anything that might seem to be existing laws of the universe ... we represent a higher culture, a higher technology, which these poor fools can’t understand because they’re primitive savages ... we can plan the globe ... we’re going to take the whole thing over!”

At this time, the League also quickly veered from ersatz leftism to an equally unconventional rightist stance. De Monde was to be “sworn in as U.S. President ... to organize the world economy” (in a non-election year). It was also seen that the League continued an ancient, hidden elite network. A new literary style included self-referents as “we wise ones”, “golden souls”, “shepherds”, “gammasters”. At the start of this decade, De Monde spoke on priestly celibacy:

“Since I, like Dante within the account of the Commedia, have walked from the Inferno through Purgatory to come to acquire and perfect the knowledge expressed through the concluding,