

# 5

## Conspiracy Theory and Antisemitism

No critical introduction to conspiracy theories would be complete without a discussion of their strong and longstanding connection with antisemitism. As we have seen in Chapter 3, for a substantial proportion of its history the conspiracy tradition was dominated by the idea of a Jewish plot to take over the world. This connection is not just historical, however. Much of contemporary antisemitism remains inherently conspiratorial. Animosity towards Jews is today seldom expressed in terms of demeaning stereotypes that defined racial antisemitism in the past or as routine 'dislike' of Jews or 'disapproval' of their culture or religion (Smith, 1996, Bauman, 1999, Harrison, 2006). Instead, the biggest 'fault' of Jews in the eyes of antisemites worldwide is that they are in possession of considerable wealth, power and influence and are using it to exercise undue control over democratic governments, international organisations, financial institutions, media corporations and cultural establishments. For those affiliated with the right, whether in the West, in the Middle East or elsewhere, the Jewish elite represents an omnipotent force with almost supernatural powers, intent on the destruction of independent nations and the creation of a secular, Jewish-controlled, New World Order. Sections of the left, on the other hand, see it as united in a powerful Zionist/Israel/Jewish lobby that pulls the strings of American politics and controls Western media. It is also noteworthy that conspiratorial antisemitism appears to be unrelated to the actual presence of Jews. Conspiracy theories with antisemitic motifs are expounded and believed even in cultures that have no Jewish minority, such as in Japan (Goodman and Miyazawa, 2000, Kowner, 1997). Similarly, in Eastern and Central Europe, levels of antisemitism are unconnected to the size of the local Jewish community or the history of relations between Jews and the majority

population (Hockenos, 1993). This pattern has led a number of scholars of Eastern European antisemitism to refer to the local manifestations of anti-Jewish prejudice as 'antisemitism without Jews' (Lendvai, 1972, Hockenos, 1993).

The connection between antisemitism and conspiracy theory is also manifested in the fact that the idea of a *Jewish* conspiracy persists as a latent motif in a sizeable proportion of contemporary conspiracy culture. Of course, not all conspiracy theories are unavoidably antisemitic, but it is also true that discernible within many conspiracy narratives, even those that are not explicitly targeting Jews, are worrying, and often subtle, reminders of the conspiracy theory's earlier, overtly antisemitic incarnations.

The present chapter considers the connection between conspiracy theory and antisemitism from two distinct angles. Drawing on the important, but in literature on conspiracy theories often neglected work of Michael Billig (1978, 1989), the first part of the chapter looks at why antisemitism persists within conspiracist culture, or rather, why authors of conspiracy material so often find it difficult to escape subtle allusions to the Jewish dimension within alleged plot. In exploring this question, forthcoming sections address a broader issue that was raised at the end of the previous chapter, namely, what it is about the way in which conspiracy theories are written and communicated that preserves their distinctive rhetorical style and thematic consistency.

As well as looking at the persistence of antisemitism *within* the conspiracy culture, the present chapter considers how the motif of Jewish conspiracy sometimes contaminates ordinary discourse and becomes perceived as a respectable interpretation of reality, even within political cultures which do not have a notable record of antisemitism. This is an important point because what makes conspiracy theories so prevalent in modern society is precisely that they are *not* confined to a closed community of conspiracy enthusiasts, sealed off from the mainstream by the adherence to a dysfunctional 'paranoid' explanatory logic, or to individuals or groups committed to right-wing, or radical Islamist ideologies. Rather, they influence everyday understanding of politics through a loose array of images, motifs and assumptions about the world, which through transmission and communication become part of the shared knowledge and beliefs, and which are then available to people to draw upon as they attempt to make sense of events around them. The second part of the chapter examines this issue using as an example the way in which, in recent years, the conflict in the Middle East provided traditional antisemitic motifs of Jewish power, greed and