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A SPECIFIC SOCIAL FUNCTION OF RUMORS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY'S TIES IN TROUBLED TIMES. A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS

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This paper hypothesizes that conspiracy theories and rumors are an act of social conformism. The evaluation of their plausibility, and their success, is collectively determinate regarding the established values of an in-group and the social context. In periods of troubles they flourish to reaffirm themselves and strengthen community's ties, structures and leaderships. After a theoretical introduction, I will demonstrate this assumption through a multilevel analysis (macro, meso, micro) which considers a wide range of social situations from the French Revolution to neighborhood conflicts and from open riots to latent crises.

Key words: rumors, conspiracy theories, social functions, social ties, multilevel analysis

At the end of the 1940's, the American Administration was very preoccupied by rumors that circulated throughout World War II. To understand this phenomenon, several social psychologists were committed to conduct studies (Knapp, 1944; Allport, Postman 1947). They assumed that rumors were harmful (Rosnow, Fine, 1976: 26-17) because they deliver false information; that is why they must be fought to preserve the social order (Neubauer, 1999: 6-7). Knapp is particularly representative of this tendency¹. To enhance peoples' confidence in mainstream media and the Administration, he recommended: 1°) issue /broadcast/spread news as quickly as possible through modern media like TV networks and radios; 2°) issue/broadcast/spread news as widely and accessibly as possible; 3°) prevent idleness, monotony and personal disorganization. Nonetheless, history and empirical studies have shown that those prescriptions do not work². Quite the opposite, the more information that circulates in the public sphere³; the more rumors arise to bypass official statements particularly

1 See also: Allport, Lepkin, 1945.

2 For a general state-of-the-art review on the study of rumors in social sciences, see: Donovan 2007.

3 For discussion: Al-Kandari, 2010: 61-62.

when governments and mainstream media suffer from a huge lack of confidence. Rumors reveal trust in the people while they express, as counter power, defiance against official institutions (Fine, 2007: 7). They suggest that narratives circulating in the social body must be taken for real or acceptable when official statements are necessarily incomplete, false or manipulated. It brings me to formulate a handful definitions, hypothesis and goals I can summarize in three points.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND DEFINITIONS

First, *rumors* considered as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo, Bordia, 2007: 19–20)⁴ and *conspiracy theories* (CTs) simply defined as “the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof, circulates solely on the margins of society” (Fenster, 2008: 1)⁵, develop in already cohesive communities because being involved in the spreading is an act of social conformism (Kapferer, 1990: 64). They flourish to reaffirm dominant and established values of an in-group at the same time they exclude the outsiders usually negatively portrayed. Rumors and CTs circulate in a group which already has a clear idea of the dichotomies “the Self/the Others” or “Us/Them” (Aldrin, 2005: 225–248). And, this stereotypic and prejudicial evaluation of the others intensifies when the members of the group feel a threat to their positions or self-esteem (Brown, Gallagher, 1992). For people who disseminate them, it enhances – symbolically at least – the feeling of belonging to a superior group. In this way, rumors and CTs fulfill an “ego-defensive function” (Katz, 1960) which serves to defend and promote what is accepted against different social behaviors. People using this function are more likely to share strong biases and negative stereotypes against others. It conversely offers comfort to individuals who want to retreat from world complexity and diversity. This ego-defensive function develops a positive self-image in social gathering. So that, rumors and CTs must be seen as a social process, an acceptable collective deliberation or narrative for the group in which they circulate because they can develop only if they seem plausible regarding the deep-rooted values of the group and the social context. It is to say that the evaluation of the plausibility of the very same narrative differs from one group to another because they do not share the same collective imagination, collective memory, biases and symbolical stereotypes. Rouquette called this phenomenon *implication* (1990: 119–120).

For instance, among African Americans, AIDS is mostly viewed as a human-made or government-made disease not only because they represent half of the infected people, but also because AIDS is seen as an instrument of “Black genocide”. As shown in a 1999 survey, “compared with Whites, roughly three times as many Blacks and Hispanics reported that it was ‘very or somewhat likely’ that AIDS is ‘the result of a government plan to intentionally kill a certain group of people by genocide’ (27.8%

4 Peterson and Gist define rumors as “an unverified account or explanation of events, circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue of public concern” (1951: 159).

5 See also: Hall (2006) argues that CTs are the belief that a group of people (“them”) secretly plot to harm another social group (“us”) in order to pursue, archive or maintain their own interest.

of Blacks, 23.6% Hispanics, 8% of Whites). In the 2003 survey, roughly four times as many Blacks and almost 3 times as many Hispanics compared with Whites (34.1% of Blacks, 21.9% of Hispanics, 8.4% Whites) reported that it was ‘very or somewhat likely’ that AIDS is ‘the result of a government plan to intentionally kill a certain group of people by genocide’” (Russel, Katz, alia., 2011: 40–41). Put another way, evaluating plausibility of hearsay is not only assessed by individuals, but is linked to interaction contexts and social systems. Plausibility, and its evaluation, is already tied to communities and collective judgments (Fine, 2007: 9). In other words, I challenge the idea that rumors and CTs create ties amongst the people who share and repeat them; those ties *preexist* and this is the reason why they can circulate within a group (*hypothesis 1*)⁶.

Secondly, even though it is well-known that rumors and CTs flourish in periods of war and political destabilization to mobilize a community in danger, whether this danger is real or not, I will stress that they also appear in more latent struggles. Rumors and CTs do not need wars, riots or revolutions to emerge; a mere situation a social change or insecurity, a challenge to the in-group’s status security (Pettigrew, 1998) is enough to start them: the rise of new leaders in a stable community (Festinger, Cartwright, alia., 1948), the arrival of outsiders in a neighborhood (Elias, Scotson, 1994) or the development of trendy clothes stores (Morin, alia., 1969). This is why I have chosen for the title of this article “troubled times” instead of crisis, struggle, conflict or war. It looks more appropriated to cover all the situations I examine. From riots to latent opposition in suburbs, I am willing to prove that rumors and conspiracy theories fulfil the social function of strengthening communities’ ties at all levels (*hypothesis 2*). To demonstrate this assumption, I will consider three classical levels of social interactions. First, at the macro level, I will remind how rumors and CTs play a significant part in periods of open and violent conflicts regarding the entire society like the French Revolution or ethno-confessional riots in the post-colonial India(1). Secondly, at the meso or intermediary level, I will dwell on limited but dramatic cases of violent confrontation with the authorities of dissident groups such as the events in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 and Waco, Texas, in 1993 (2). In this section I will particularly emphasis the Jonestown case because there is a lot of very relevant first hand material about how the dynamics of rumors and conspiracy theories play a significant part in the mass-murder/suicide that happened on November 18th 1978. Thirdly, at the micro level of a neighborhood, I will argue that even though there is no violent conflict, rumors arise to reaffirm – symbolically at least – the dominant values and habits of established groups. Then, they contribute to strengthen social conformism and secured old-line leaderships as well. Two cases will be taken into account: an established and cohesive

6 Of course this function of rumors and CTs is not the only one. In a yet unpublished research report (Giry, 2017) I argue that CTs fulfil at least seven social functions. Most of them (4 out of 7) are intentionally and consciously developed by social actors who support CTs. Robert K. Merton called them *manifest* functions (1968: 73–138). Quite the opposite, *latent* functions, 3 out of 7, are unconscious, unintended but beneficial. Put another way, manifest functions are the consequences that people observe or expect. They are explicitly stated and understood by the participants in the relevant action whereas latent functions are unexpected in their developments, goals and results. Manifest functions are: 1°) a function of explanation and simplification of the historical process; 2°) a function of reification of the social process; 3°) a function of mobilization; 4°) a function of politicization and legitimization. Latent functions are: 1°) a function of paradoxical rationalization; 2°) a *tribunitienne* function (Lavau 1981: 342); 3°) a symbolic function.

group challenged by *outsiders*; an established social leadership challenged by an insider trying to improve his own social position (3).

Finally, this article will highlight the articulation between conspiracy theories and rumors as previously defined. It is to show how rumors as infra-political narratives⁷ and conspiracy theories as theories of power (Viltard, 2003: 92), global and political narratives echo into one another. How the big picture of a largescale conspiracy led by government officials, communist agents or nobles to take over the power interacts with a small picture of local rumors of betrayal, subversion or communism. It will be interesting to illustrate how they fuel and supply each other (*hypothesis 3*).

To sum up, from the most obvious situations of violent conflicts to the less evident circumstances of latent oppositions, I will show through many examples from different geographical areas that rumors and CTs circulate in already cohesive groups to strengthen their social structures. They also help to reaffirm dominant values and secure established leaderships.

1. RUMORS AND CTS IN VIOLENT CONFLICTS INVOLVING THE ENTIRE SOCIETY: THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL RIOTS IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

In periods of wars, riots, revolutions or violent conflicts, rumors and CTs often flourish to explain the origin of deep social change as an intentional and secret agency. When established stratus and society collapse, it is easy to believe in evil plots (Gorth, 1987; Campion-Vincent, 2005: 105).

1.1. The French Revolution and the Great Fear of 1789

It is no question here to deal with theories that emerge after the French Revolution to explain its events in terms of conspiracy (Barruel, 1797). On the contrary, I will study the dynamics of rumors and CTs during the very revolutionary process to show how they fuel each other and how they reaffirm the established values and status, notably the leadership of the king in the beginning of the Revolution.

Since the 18th century, rumors of famine plots were part of the French collective imagination. As well-described by Kaplan (1982), bread scarcities and its consequent starvations were usually explained in terms of a conspiracy led by stupid ministers, obnoxious – Protestant – bankers, stingy storekeepers and shady bakers. Only the king was said not to be part of the plot. Hearsay of speculation on wheat or flour, of overflowing secret barns, of crops thrown out in the Seine regularly circulated among the French people in the cities to explain scandalous prices of bread and basic foods.

On the eve of the Revolution and during its beginning in early summer of 1789, right before the harvest, this vision of a famine plot was anchored in the French collective imagination and “many people came to suspect the existence of a series of threats to themselves and their communities” (Tackett, 2003: 151). Combined with this famine plot theory, numerous rumors came from neighboring villages to announce that, one the one hand, foreign soldiers were invading the country and, on the other hand,

⁷ This does not deny the insight that rumors can deal with politics or political actors (e.g.: Melania Trump does not share her husband’s bed, Emmanuel Macron is actually gay, etc.) but they are not or rarely political themselves.

thousands of gangs of beggars, wanderers and villains called *brigands* were looting the country. The strength and persistence of those rumors mixed with the collapse of the established feudal order started the Great Fear of 1789. The panic was particularly intensive in areas dominated by an oral culture or affected by the highest rises in wheat prices during the preceding months. The Great Fear thus initiates a new wave of rumors about a foreign invasion and CTs dealing with an imminent political subversion. Even the Deputies in Paris were affected by the panic. In their letters dated July 1789, the idea of local conspiracies or plot famines is largely exhibited whereas it was totally absent a month before and almost forgotten in August (Tackett, 2000: 703).

Analyzing the Great Fear, Lefebvre formulated the thesis that panics and violence were due to the belief in an “aristocratic plot”, a conspiracy led by the nobles against the people and the King (1932: 49). The brigands were also believed to be part of this aristocratic plot. Their mission was to steal and destroy crops to starve the people. If this thesis was dominant in the 20th century, recent research has shown that the link he established between the brigands and the nobles as the origin of the Great Fear is highly questionable. On the contrary, it appears that in the beginning of the Great Fear, rumors of gangs of brigands genuinely strengthened ties and vertical solidarity among communities (Sutherland, 2003: 68). In the zones touched by the panic, there are many examples of nobles and clergymen recruited to lead militias to defend their communities (Tackett, 2003: 158). This situation was observed in Montoire, Brive, Cahors or Limoges. Faced with those brigands’ rumors, peasants and townsmen reaffirm their confidence in the established seigneurial system and feudal rules. *Unions sacrées* between nobles and commoners were declared to face the forthcoming danger and national guards were formed in many villages of Artois, Soissonais, Maine, Gévaudan or Aquitaine. Furthermore, it is important to notice that during the Great Fear very few acts of physical violence or material destruction were directed toward the nobles. By this time, the nobles and the King of France appeared to be on the people’s side whereas the brigands were portrayed as agents of foreign countries or unknown enemies.

But afterwards, when the panic was over and the people realized that there were actually no gangs of brigands, the idea emerged that those rumors were forged by the nobles including the *prince de Condé* or the *Comte d’Artois* to secure their positions and leaderships (Jolivet, 1930: 134; Tackett, 2004). And, when in some places brigands had really existed, rumors came out to explain they were noble-manipulated or noble-operated. CTs about an “aristocratic plot” are rather a consequence of the Great Fear than its cause. Indeed, when two years later a new cycle of rumors of famine plot appeared, it accused the nobles of leading a vast conspiracy against the people. Whereas in 1789 the nobles were seen as protectors of their communities, in 1791 it was generally admitted they were the enemies of the nation. By this time, many letters addressed to the Constituent’s Committee enhanced the thesis of a large scale conspiracy ruled by refractory nobles and clergymen against the Constitution, the citizens and the King. It was only after his flight in June 1791 and the discovery of his personal letters that it became clear that the monarch had been part of the conspiracy for months.

1.2. Ethno-confessional Riots in Post-kolonial India: Rumors and CTs as Self-fulfilling Prophecies

Since its independence, India regularly faces ethnic violence and confessional riots that alternatively opposed Hindus and Muslims, and Hindus and Sikhs. Through those

periods rumors arise in each ethnic group to reaffirm its cohesiveness, its – righteousness – values and remind how evil and rotten the other one is. As noted by Allport and Postman (1947: 182), rumors “firm pre-existing attitudes rather than forming new ones.” Reinforcing and justifying (pre)existing biases and stereotypes seem to be very powerful in rumors and CTs that lead to ethno-confessional violence (Kakar, 1996, 2005; Horowitz, 2001). All the more so, rumors of violence are enforcing the dynamics of violence. Everything happens as if “rumor-generated violence has the perfect effect of confirming” (Bhavnani, Findley, Kuklinski, 2009: 877–878) the rumors’ veracity or at least plausibility. Rumors of violence and subsequent violence are then engaged in a vicious circle which must be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy as defined by Merton (1948: 195)⁸. And, this process and dynamics of circulation of social and ethnic hate leading to extreme violence are particularly clear in the Indian post-colonial era.

Since 1947 at least, animosity and violence tend to be part of the relationships between Hindus and Indian Muslim minorities accused of being agents of Pakistan. In both communities, rumors and CTs feed animosity, mutual fears and social hate that sometimes end up in violence. In Hindus areas, rumors disseminate negative appraisals of Muslims. They are accused of killing or burning Hindus alive, raping their women, kidnapping their children, poisoning the food and the milk or castrating non-Muslims. They are also portrayed as coward terrorists heavily armed acting secretly by night against Hindus’ interests. Put together, all those rumors reflect the Hindu’s deep-rooted bias of Muslim disloyalty. In other words, Muslims are accused of running grand conspiracy against India and Hinduism. Reciprocally, in Muslim areas, hearsay reports that Hindus are threatening Islam by forcing Muslims to convert to Hinduism, they kill, kidnap or rape children and women, they poison the food and the milk, they destroy mosques and they are heavily armed as well. All combined, those rumors enhance the long-standing fear of Muslims being swamped by Hindus and then wiped out. And, as observed by Kakar (2005: 54–55), this set of rumors was particularly strong and highly spread in the ethno-confessional riots of 1947 during the partition of India and Pakistan. They were used as self-justification for extreme violence in both communities which felt in mortal danger. In the riots of 1969 in Ahmedabad, 1990 in Hyderabad and 2002 in Ahmedabad again, the same rumors circulated again within both ethnic groups. In this mirrors and scales game, perpetrators of the ones are the victims of the others and, mastering anxiety and fears, rumors and CTs play their social function. In strengthening individual identities with his/her group, they contribute to reactive ethno-confessional solidarities. In subsuming individuals to the group, rumors reinforce its cohesiveness and sense of superiority by exalting its collective values, memory, imagination and “identity”.

The same process of circulation of social hate through rumors and CTs leading to violence characterizes the relationships between Hindus and Sikhs. In the everyday life, Sikhs’ narratives usually represent Hindus as liars, snakes, weak and effeminate whereas Hindus’ hearsay portrays Sikhs as heavily armed violent and fanatic snakes too. Crystallized in rumors, those stereotypes and biases fueled hostility and violence between the communities as self-fulfilling prophecies. In 1984, the tensions were brought to

8 “The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come *true*. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.”

a climax after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Das, 1998) when hostility and animosity spread by rumors turned into violence against the Sikhs. They were accused of separatism, disloyalty to India and made responsible for the original violence against Hindus in Punjab. Rumors also circulated that Sikhs were celebrating Mrs. Gandhi's death, had poisoned water and bread or killed hundreds of Hindus in a Delhi Station (Tambiah, 1996: 237). Sometimes Mrs. Gandhi's assassination was even claimed as the first step of a grand conspiracy mastered by the Sikhs. On the Sikhs' side, rumors echoed that there was a conspiracy going on to transform their community into a "weak race" (Das, 1998).

Such narratives were indeed endorsed by Sikh and Hindu leaders in a systematic dualism separating the self from the other, and not only the peasants or working men did so. "Contrary to the notion that certain classes of people are protected from the mesmerizing effect of rumors (e.g., the educated), I found that many professionals – bureaucrats, teachers, and medical doctors – inhabited for a time that twilight zone in which it was difficult to know whether it was wiser to believe in rumors or in the official versions of events." (Das, 1998) Hence, those educated people and communities' leaders – like Bhindranwale for the Sikhs or Akali Dal for the Hindus – who had espoused some extreme beliefs deep-rooted in the collective imagination of their communities played a decisive role in the dissemination of violence-promoting rumors, the mobilization of crowds and the reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity that led to violence, riots and murders. And the more communities' leaders and educated people interacted with the rest of their community, the more powerful this process was (Bhavnani, Findley, Kuklinski, 2009: 890). Dealing with negative stereotypes on Sikhs and rumors of mass murder committed or about to be committed, Hindu leaders organized their communities. They formed militias to lead punitive expeditions that turned into massacre and reciprocal violence from the Sikhs that justified further acts of cruelty. The self-fulfilling prophecy was tragically realized.

To summarize, rumors and CTs based on ethno-cultural or ethno-confessional prejudices and stereotypes powerfully contribute to the production and circulation of social hate and the exaltation of in-group values, status and "identities". Particularly fluid in periods of riots, violence or political destabilization, their movements create the conditions under which in-groups "become pitted against each other in fear and mutual hatred, constructing images of self and other" (Das, 1998: 109). Rumors of violence fueled the fire of violence which justify, legitimate and reinforce preexisting stereotypes or prejudices as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. RUMORS AND CTs CIRCULATING IN DISSIDENT GROUPS IN VIOLENT CONFRONTATION WITH THE AUTHORITIES: THE DISASTERS OF JONESTOWN AND WACO

If the first situation involved the entire society in a violent conflict, the second section considers how the dynamics of rumors and CTs lead dissident groups to mass-suicide/murder. Through many letters or testimonies, I mainly focus on the events of Jonestown to show how rumors were decisive to strengthen Jim Jones' leadership on his followers. As a new religious movement, not to say a cult organization, the Peoples Temple saw itself and its leader as the targets of a big government conspiracy. Starting from that, rumors and CTs played a preponderant part in the life of the community. It was also a way to reinforce solidarity and ties among Jones' followers.

The second case is investigated in shorter terms and from a different point of view for two main reasons. First, despite less first-hand material, it seems clear that the dynamics that led to the disaster of Waco in 1993 was very similar to what happened in Jonestown. Consequently, I will study how the reminding of Jonestown and its aftermath was omnipresent during the siege of Waco. On the one hand, the Branch Davidians and their leader David Koresh declared that the government wanted to destroy them because of its anti-religiousness just like it did in Jonestown. Then several rumors of imminent attacks flourished in the compound before and during the siege. On the other hand, the authorities were influenced by the portrait of Koresh they had themselves drawn: a heavily armed Jim Jones-like failed personality and guru leading his community to mass-suicide.

2.1. The Mass-suicide/Murder of Jonestown, Guyana: 18th november 1978

“Victims of Conspiracy: *This is an organized, orchestrated, premeditated government campaign to destroy a politically progressive church*”. Here are the headlines of a booklet edited by the Peoples Temple in 1978 which synthesized the church conspiratorial state of mind.

Born in Indiana in 1931, Jones always wanted to be a preacher. He founded his first church in 1953 which welcomed Black and White people from poor origins. Left to Brazil in 1962 because he feared a nuclear apocalypse, Jones came back in the United-States in 1964 to establish his Peoples Temple in California. Self-proclaimed reincarnation of Jesus, Jones was at the head of more than 20 000 followers, mostly African Americans from lower social classes. They had to leave all their goods to the Temple and live in a community. Accused of sexual abuses on children, frauds, physical punishments on adults or phony miracles by former-members (Kilduff, Tracy, 1977), Jones spread among his followers the idea that those accusations were part of a government conspiracy to destroy the Temple. According to Jones, racist and conservative politicians wanted to nip his plan of a socialist mixed-race society in the bud. In 1977, Jones and some 800 of his most devoted followers left to Guyana to create their heaven on earth: Jonestown.

If the settlement in Jonestown was highly enthusiastic (Traver, 1977a, 1977b; Chaikin-Alexander, 1977)⁹, the atmosphere quickly turned into fear and state of siege mentality. Jones was more and more violent and paranoid. He multiplied physical punishment and transformed his followers into slaves. Jones, as ex-members testified, created “a conspiratorial atmosphere and the impression among the people that (they) were under attack almost continually in order to (...) maintain some organizational cohesiveness” (Chaikin, 1977). For instance, Jones spread rumors that the United States government had marshaled Black people into concentration camps (Barkun, 2013: 72–76), was conducting a “Black genocide” (Goldberg, 2001: 159–188), was responsible for Dr. King and President Kennedy’ assassinations, the KKK was patrolling at the borders and a nuclear war was about to start (Berthillier, Wolochatiuk, 2006). A first climax was reached when Jones convinced himself that the American army was about to invade Jonestown to kill him. A six day siege started. People were confined in a hysterical atmosphere of apocalypse and forced to go through “White Nights”,

9 All the letters mentioned are retrieved from: http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=18985. Accessed: September October 2016.

kinds of mass-suicide training sessions (Chaikin, 1977). Resulting from this paranoid and fear atmosphere, Jones managed to strengthen the community around him. He convinced his followers that to face this obsequious conspiracy it was necessary to commit suicide and it was better to die than living in the forthcoming American dictatorship. In 1978, rumors of fascist invasions or imminent murders were the daily narratives that circulated in Jonestown. In the middle of the jungle, rumors were the main source of information for isolated residents who had almost no contact with people from outside and very little access to media. In their last letters, people of Jonestown described a situation of extreme tension and the omnipresence of a conspiratorial atmosphere (Grunnet, 1978a, 1978b; Johnston, 1978) that led them to accept mass-suicide as a revolutionary act of resistance¹⁰ (Alexander, 1978; Moore, 1978).

Finally, the tragic end happened on 18th November 1978, Jim Jones persuaded his followers to give a cyanide-laced Kool-Aid drink to their children and inject themselves with cyanide (Bratich, 2003: 377-378). During this final “White Night”, “residents proclaimed their willingness to take the lives of their own children rather than leave them for the fascists find” (Moore, 2013). The visit of Congressman Ryan who investigated allegation of abuses in Jonestown and the defection of a few members led to the disaster. After Ryan and defectors’ assassinations, Jones told his followers that there was no way to get back in the life they used to live: thousands of fascist soldiers were about to invade Jonestown to jail, torture or kill them. They had to commit mass-suicide/murder to save them, especially the children.

Afterward, the Jonestown episode and its mass-suicide/murder started many CTs which play a very decisive part in the dynamics of the Waco disaster in 1993.

2.2. The Tragic Ending of the Siege of Waco, Texas: 28th February – 19th April 1993

19th April 1993, after a 51 day siege, the FBI launched an attack against the Branch Davidians’ complex in Waco in order to “flush them out” according to President Clinton’s words. Broadcast live on TV networks, flames quickly appeared over the compound and at least seventy-four men, women and children died. Immediately, the main question became who started the fire. Did the Davidians start the blaze themselves as part of a suicide pact? Or, was the arson started by the FBI? According to a *Time Magazine* poll on August 1999, 61% of the Americans agreed the second option (Mulloy, 2003: 718). Even if the official report stated that it was the Davidians who actually started the fire (1993) – it was confirmed in the final report in November 2000 (Danforth, 2000), many CTs flourished to explain what really happened in Waco¹¹.

During the siege Koresh and his followers were persuaded that the American government wanted to kill them as part of a conspiracy against religious liberties. For

10 Jones and his followers re-appropriated the concept of “revolutionary suicide” from the Black Panthers Party for Self-Defense. In the 1960’s radical groups from the left developed the idea that the American government had planned a grand conspiracy to destroy progressive movements. They considered that die-fighting was a political act of resistance and it was better to die than living in a “fascist” or racist country.

11 Two years later to the day, far right activist Timothy McVeigh bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City to protest against the government cover-up for the “massacre”. He was convinced that the government ruled a conspiracy against the American people.

him, it became clear that the government was allied with Babylon (Bitter, 2003: 171) and the siege they underwent was the 5th seal of Apocalypse. Many rumors of imminent attacks, of tanks and “black helicopters” (Barkun, 2013: 70–72) roaming around their complex reinforced their conviction that the End would come soon and at the same time strengthened the community. Koresh and his followers viewed themselves as martyrs. What’s more, Koresh was fully aware that he was portrayed as a Jim Jones-kind guru in the media and for that reason he would be killed by the government. He also believed that if he surrendered, he would have to face an iniquitous trial. On the other side, the FBI considered Koresh as a heavily armed half-guru half-crook who sexually abused children and wanted to lead his community in mass-suicide. In their understanding of the standoff, the parallel with Jonestown was omnipresent (Luca, 2006: 115). For the authorities, Koresh’s Bible babble was not understandable. It was clear that he was using delaying tactics to destroy the proof against him and preparing a mass-suicide. When Koresh broke his words to release the children after he had spoken on TV networks, the FBI mind was definitively made-up. “Tension was at climax [...] because of the competition engaged on the perception of the moral order of the world, on the values, on differences of rationality and on concurrent authorities which should prime: state or god” (Luca, 2006: 118). Finally, interactions between the religious-based conspiratorial vision of Koresh and his followers and the FBI Jonestown-like scenario led to disaster. As rumors of an ineluctable assault spread, Koresh and his groups were more and more bound and ready to die while the authorities were more and more convinced that they collectively planned to commit suicide since the beginning. Like in the ethno-confessional riots, the dynamics of rumors and CTs revealed a self-fulfilling prophecy and the siege of Waco ended up in a pool of blood.

3. RUMORS AND CTs IN NON-VIOLENT OPPOSITIONS: CHALLENGING THE ESTABLISHED AND SECURED LEADERSHIPS

If hitherto I have taken into account several social situations characterized by violence to support my thesis of rumors and CTs as means to strengthen community’s ties, I will go now through two different situations where there is no physical violence at all. I will consider situations of latent oppositions to emphasize the role played by rumors and CTs to secure old-line leaderships, established values and deep-rooted collective representations. In a context of social change, when established leaderships are challenged by rising ones, rumors and CTs arise as an act of social conformism that remind and strengthen in-group structures as well as exclude outsiders or challengers.

3.1. Old Residents and Newcomers: Established vs. Outsiders

To shed light on the function of rumors in a situation of latent opposition between established and outsiders, it is necessary to consider the classical enquiry conducted by Elias and Scotson in an industrial neighborhood in the outskirts of Leicester given the pseudonym of Winston Prava in the 1960’s. Winston Prava was divided in three sections: the first zone was a middle class area and zones 2 and 3 were blue collar. The zone 2, nicknamed “*the Village*”, was the first area built in 1860 by the founder of Winston Prava, Charles Winston. Residents of zone 2 developed since then a sense of community and collective history. “They went through a collective process – from the

past to the future *via* the present – which gave them a stock of common memories, ties and dislikes” noted Wieviorka in his preface to the French edition (1997: 55). When the estate located in the zone 3 was built in the late 1940’s, an “us versus them” (ego-defensive function) relationship was immediately elaborated between established people from zones 1 and 2 and the newcomers.

The criterion which fuels this socio-dynamics was the long-time residency in the neighborhood. We are assisting at the “resourcization” of duration as a strong agent of discrimination particularly powerful when there is no objective criterion of differentiation. “In Winston Prava, newcomers are victims of segregation, stigmatization and rejection although there is no difference of “race”, language, national culture or class. Among the ones who are rejected, most of them are most of the time blue collars or from working class origin” (Wieviorka, 1997: 13), just like people from the zone 2. Put another way, even though there are no sociological differences between people living in zones 2 and 3, there is racism without race and class struggle without class antagonism in Winston Prava. Generation after generation, old families had monopolized the sources of power and prestige and developed a collective charisma which gave them a unique social position and superiority. This “capital of duration” (Heinich, 1997: 80), or I better say *capital of establishment*, is visible through three patterns used to strengthen the socially established structures: 1°) endogamy and social reproduction among the “old mother centered family”; 2°) pubs, local clubs and family networks as institutions of socialization and segregation; 3°) dissemination of rumors, gossips and negative cliché-based stereotypes. In hearsay circulating in the zones 1 and 2, people from the third one were portrayed as a dirty, drunkard and violent colony of cockneys living in wetland or haunts of rats. The zone 3 was in addition known as an area full of criminals and prostitutes.

Hence, gossip and rumors are not a peripheral or independent phenomenon. They are constitutive of the social life of the community living in the second zone for they constantly testify of its superiority and the positive image of itself (Elias, Scotson, 1994: 89). The ego-defensive function of those tales is at once to integrate and exclude people (Elias, Scotson, 1994: 100-101) of the righteous community entwined in a cohesive network of families who share common interests, biases and sense of their own superiority (Elias, Scotson, 1994: 5). Despite this, it is important to state that those rumors and gossip are never directed toward a single person but against people of the third zone as a global entity (Heinich, 1997: 81-85). Most of the time, people from the zones 2 and 3 know each other, they work in the same factories and are personally in good terms (Elias, Scotson, 1994: xvi-xvii). But, people from the second zone collectively testified how they felt disappointed and upset when some outsiders settled in their neighborhood and how they perceived the newcomers as a threat to their way of life. Here was the origin of supporting rumors and gossips about the superiority of the “Village” and its residents and negative ones on the collective indignity of the newcomers/outsiders (Elias, Scotson, 1994: xvi-xvii).

Vilifications setting in motion the socially inferior group’s own sense of shame or guilt feelings with regard to some inferiority symbols, some signs of the worthlessness attributed to them and the paralysis of their power to strike back which goes hand in hand with it, from thus part of the social apparatus with which socially dominant and superior groups maintain their domination and superiority over socially inferior groups. Individual members of the inferior group are always supposed to be tarred by the same brush. They cannot escape from the group stigmatization individually, just as they

cannot escape individually from the lower status of their group (Elias, Scotson, 1994: 102-103).

In this way, rumors and gossip which circulate in the second zone enhance the cohesiveness of the "Village" and underline their self-constructed image of superiority and righteousness. They in addition play a significant part in the perpetuation of social control and conformism and they contribute to strengthen family's ties and collective charisma as well. At the same time, they disseminate negative cliché-based prejudices and stereotypes in the collective imagination of people who live in the second zone. Rumors and gossip finally turn the newcomers into definitive outsiders that must be feared and kept apart.

3.2. The Rise of New Leaders: Established vs. Ascending Insiders

In February of 1947, Festinger and his team were conducting a research program on the problem of social organization and communication when they had the privilege to observe from its origin the spread of a rumor. In a poor shipyard workers' neighborhood, the inactive local tenants' committee was challenged in its leadership. With the help of a community organizer, people in the neighborhood started several social programs such as the development of a nursery school. Consequently, the local leadership "was now mainly in the hands of people who had previously not been active" (Festinger, Cartwright, *alia.*, 1948: 468) while the leadership of the tenants' committee and its secretaries was waning. Among those new leaders, Mrs. C. was particularly involved and considered in the nursery school activities. A couple of weeks later, all this well-advanced project was definitively stopped. Rumors had arisen: the new leaders were communists; no one could trust them. The program was communist-based and Un-American. Surprisingly, only residents were pointed out by rumors. Mrs. C. was the main target of the rumors whereas the community organizers who started the programs were spared despite being outsiders.

Let's study carefully the dynamics of those rumors which must be seen as a piece of resistance to change. How did they flourish and disseminate to secure established leaderships and enhance social conformism. "The increased number of people who were participating threatened the status position of old leaders. If these activities proceeded, new leaders would almost certainly become dominant" (Festinger, Cartwright, *alia.*, 1948: 470) noticed Festinger. Particularly threatened was the position of the secretary of the tenants' committee. A close friend and next-door neighbor of Mrs. C., she became exceptionally active in the spreading of communism rumors. Along with Mr. M. who was the notorious long-time anticommunist leader of boy's activities in the local church, they started the rumor that Mrs. C. was an "avowed communist" (Festinger, Cartwright, *alia.*, 1948: 471) who read communist newspapers and had radical opinions. Their positions of "experts" (Kapferer, 1990: 80) or better-informed people played a strategic part in dissemination of the rumor¹². Through a process of *fides implicita*¹³ - implicit trust (Aldrin, 2005: 200), the secretary and Mr.

12 Rouquette (1990: 120) similarly argues that personal implication of elites or socialites plays a significant part in the dissemination of rumors.

13 *Fides implicita* is a social process of symbolic violence in which dominated people (young, less-educated, less-informed people, etc.) entrust - supposedly - more qualified people (the dominants) to judge or evaluate a social situation or phenomenon. See: Bourdieu, 1984: 245.

M. appeared as the most qualified people to evaluate the rumor's credibility and give it a chance to spread in the neighborhood. Consequently, the premise that Mrs. C. was a communist agent was quickly accepted by the residents.

But, "rumor rarely appears as itself: it goes with its share of proof which confirms its undeniable credibility. In some way, its strength resides in its structuring effect on our perception: it gives sense to numerous facts that either we have never paid attention to, or the sense never looked clear. It gives us a coherent system to explain a large number of scattered facts: in this, it satisfies our need for order in the understanding of surrounding phenomena" (Kapferer, 1990: 93). So that, a cognitive process of reorganization took place and several events of the past involving Mr. C. were double-checked in the light of the rumor. Regarding the premise of "avowed communism", it was clear that Mrs. C., a long-time communist agent, settled in the neighborhood to spy or subvert it and the movie shown in a meeting was communist propaganda and its music composed by Aaron Copland¹⁴ "sounded Russian". Everything was added up to support the premise of communism and discredit Mrs. C. and the new leaders.

Rumors conversely became supporting narratives for the old leaders. Not only did they put an end to the social activities of the ascending leaders but also preserved and reaffirmed the old leadership structures. The tenants' committee concurrently strengthened its prestige in the community because it seemed not soft on communism. When rumors arose, the committee contacted the regional management office which sent a community organizer to the neighborhood. It was told to be careful because communist agents may have infiltrated some social program. As a result, Mrs. C. and a few other new leaders were totally ostracized by the rest of the community. The situation became even worse when the "avowed communist" had to face vicious anti-Semitic slanders from the overwhelming WASP majority.

Finally, with the distance of history it is interesting to observe that a local rumor of communist-supported activities interacts with the big picture of a so-called communist conspiracy to take over the United States during the "Witches Hunt". Like in the neighborhood studied by Festinger, it appears that "the issue of communism in the United States was of much greater concern to the elite" (Gibson, 1988: 519) to secure its leadership. This dynamic concerns both local and national elites¹⁵ throughout the United States (Stouffer, 1955: 40-44). Quite the opposite, if obviously the American citizens were strongly anti-communist, only 1% of them spontaneously pointed out in polls communism as the number one danger that the United States had to face (Tointet, 1984: 76).

CONCLUSION

To sum-up, rumors and CTs develop in already cohesive communities as an act of social conformism (ego-defensive function). Collectively accepted as plausible, they reaffirm and strengthen through a process of *fides implicita* the dominant values, established structure and secured leadership of an *in-group* at the same time they exclude the outsiders and challengers usually negatively portrayed. Rumors circulate

14 During the McCarthyism's era, Copland was accused of being a communist agent and was blacklisted.

15 See how Richard Nixon used in 1948 the Alger Hiss case as a political springboard (Huret, 2009: 73-74).

then in a group which already has a clear idea of its own superiority and of the dichotomies “the self/the others” or “us/them”. They are particularly pro-active and powerful when the members and all the more so the leaders of the in-group feel a threat to their positions. Sometimes, no matter if they are right or wrong, prejudices and stereotypes contained in rumors turn into self-fulfilling prophecies which feed rumors in a vicious circle. Rumors and CTs design scapegoats who are responsible of all the evil things from wars to a mere change in the social structure of a neighborhood.

This dynamic of rumors and CTs is particularly obvious in the migrant crisis of the middle of the 2010’s. Portrayed in European media and radical political discourses as outsiders or possible terrorists, refugees are accused of being agents of destabilization and subversion. Their religion, their habits or their “culture” are presented as a threat to our Christian civilization. Many more prejudices and negative stereotypes circulate in rumors and CTs. For instance, Renaud Camus (2011), a French far right activist, prophesizes that in the fifty coming years, Europe will be an Islamic area thanks to the complicity of governments and European institutions. He called this phenomenon “*le grand remplacement*” – the great substitution. Muslim people from Arabic areas will flood Europe – through hidden agency – to reduce European Christian people into *dhimmis* or barely tolerated minorities (Bat Ye’Or, 2005).

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