“Unking and Unpriest the Earth!”

Conspiracy Theory, the Illuminati and Revolutionary Freemasonry in the Writings of the abbé Barruel and Nicolas Bonneville

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Abstract

This thesis proposes an explanation for origin of conspiracy theories about the French Revolution. Despite being unfounded, the conspiracy theory blaming the Illuminati for the Revolution became widespread because it appeared to be supported by evidence. The primary source material consists of texts produced by two contemporaries. Augustin Barruel, a counterrevolutionary Catholic Priest, and Nicolas Bonneville, a revolutionary Freemason, both alleged that Freemasons and the Illuminati had caused the Revolution of 1789. The abbé Barruel's book *Memoirs pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* has been a touchstone for descriptions of conspiracy theories. Bonneville's writings are a missing link between reality and Barruel's conspiracy theories. Bonneville claimed that a Masonic conspiracy called the "Cercle social" had caused the Revolution and continued to spread revolutionary ideology internationally through Masonic lodges. However, the Cercle social was entirely fictional. Some previously accepted evidence of actual Masonic or Illuminati involvement in the Revolution should therefore be rejected. The results do not support the idea that conspiracy theories have a shared cause, or conspiracy theories have different causes than other theories. This conclusion is further supported using explanations for other conspiracy theories, including Bonneville's belief that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry. While irrational paranoia explains Bonneville's conspiracy theory, there is no reason to generalise this conclusion. This thesis also argues that some conspiracy theories do have recurring features with shared causes, e.g. ones caused by overreactions to signs of infiltration or subversion. Some recurring features of conspiracy theories are recurring because they provide logical consistency or prevent falsification. Despite these trends and tendencies, this thesis argues that the category itself is unsuitable as an analytical category.

keywords
Augustin Barruel, Nicolas Bonneville, Illuminati, Freemasonry, Jesuits, French Revolution, Conspiracy theory, conspiracism, secret societies

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1. Introduction
1.1. Aims and Objectives

> The first step to prevent conspiracy theories is to know that they exist. Be aware. Stop the spread (European Commission [2020]).
>
> It may be difficult to recognise them (European Commission [2020]).[1]

As can be seen from these quotes, taken from a website created to counter misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories are both important and slippery. Recognising them is important, but not as easy as we would like. Various definitions exist, along with strong criticism of their use in scholarly analysis.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine one of the most emblematic examples of a conspiracy theory in light of ongoing debates over the category "conspiracy theory" as a subject of research. The causes of this conspiracy theory will be used to discuss the theoretical possibility of explaining why people believe in conspiracy theories.

1.1.1. Research Questions

The three research questions are:
- Are Nicolas Bonneville's writings proof of Masonic or Illuminati influence on the French Revolution?
- Why did the abbé Barruel come to believe that French Revolution was the result of a conspiracy carried out by Freemasons?
- Why did Bonneville believe that Freemasonry had been taken over by Jesuits?

1.1.2. Material

The two main sources will be Augustin Barruel's 1797 *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire du Jacobinisme* (Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism) and texts by the revolutionary writer Nicolas Bonneville.

Augustin Barruel was one of the most notable contributors to early conspiracy theories about the Illuminati. His place in the historiography of conspiracy theorising is perhaps most clearly illustrated by historian Albert Soboul's use of the neologism "barruélisme" to refer to the idea that Freemasons

[1] European Commission. ([2020]). Identifying conspiracy theories. (2021, October 29) https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en

had somehow inspired or caused the French Revolution (Oberhauser 2020: 561). Other writers list Barruel as only one of several writers behind this belief (McKenzie-McHarg 2020: 23), while others see Barruel as the source of conspiracy theories as a category (Van Pelt 2014: 197-198).

Richard Hofstadter used Barruel as an examples to characterise what he called the "paranoid style". While Hofstadter considered rumours about Illuminati plots to be only one of many expressions of the paranoid style, he considered its spread across the Atlantic "a suitable point of departure" for his list of American episodes "in which the style emerged in full and archetypal splendor" (Hofstadter 1996: 10). In an article critically examining Hofstadter's text, conspiracy theory researcher Michael Butter wrote that "it is impossible to overemphasize its importance for the academic engagement with conspiracy theories" (Butter 2021: 21). Not only was Barruel notorious among other promoters of the Illuminati conspiracy theory, but that conspiracy theory was given a dubious place of honour on the list of notorious conspiracy theories that contributed to shaping our understanding of what a conspiracy theory is.

Bonneville's newspaper *La Bouche de Fer* (BdF), published between 1790 and 1791, constituted an important part of historian Albert Mathiez's conclusion that even though it's "ridiculous to explain the Revolution by an Illuminati plot, it is no less ridiculous to suppose that the friends and the ideas of the Illuminati played no role".[2] His version of events will be used to explain why the conspiracy theory of the Revolution became widespread. To avoid misleading results, Bonneville's writings will also be evaluated as evidence of Masonic involvement in the Revolution.

1.1.3. Limitations

Barruel's Memoirs contain too many groups and individuals to be examined in detail. I will focus on aspects that help to answer the broader questions of why Freemasonry/the Illuminati were blamed for the Revolution, or that are relevant to current research into conspiracy theories.

Barruel's later private beliefs about a Jewish conspiracy hidden behind the Masonic conspiracy will be left out. Discussing this aspect of his conspiracy theory would require different source material, since he intentionally chose not to publish anything about it.

1.2. Disposition

The main part of this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first revolves around Nicolas Bonneville and his activities. The first subchapters discuss his writings on the French Revolution, his

[2] "S'il est donc ridicule d'expliquer la Révolution par un complot d'Illuminés, il est non moins ridicule de supposer que les amis et les idées des Illuminés n'y ont joué aucun rôle" (Mathiez 1916: 437).

ties to the Order of the Illuminati and his impact on conspiracy theories about the Revolution. These will argue that Bonneville created a fictional Masonic group, called the *Cercle social,* which was confused with both a real lodge (*Contrat social*) and earlier rumours of an international revolutionary network known as the Propaganda club. These rumours were made more plausible because of a series of oddly convenient coincidences, and because of Bonneville's own campaign.

The second chapter focuses on various aspects of Barruel's *Memoirs*. The first subchapters discuss Barruel's use of dramatically conspiratorial rhetoric, and argue that his statements that conspirators planned everything shouldn't be taken as a claim that conspirators actually planned or carried out every specific event of the Revolution. A subchapter on Freemasonry discusses Barruel's use of Masonic degree systems, and why higher degrees feature prominently in other conspiracy theories. The final subchapter contrasts the Illuminati complot thesis with Barruel's vastly more charitable interpretation of Protestants and Protestantism, and argues against attributing Barruel's theories to existing anti-Protestant discourse.

The last chapter uses an autobiographical article to discuss Bonneville personal history with Catholicism and Freemasonry. Based on an interpretation of the article, the chapter suggests potential explanations for his theories about Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry.

1.3. Background

The thesis focuses on two main protagonists. The first in Nicolas (de) Bonneville (1760-1828). Bonneville was a former lawyer and translator of German literature before the French Revolution. He was a relatively important figure in the early years of the French Revolution, as a publisher and as an organiser. Bonneville was closely tied to "Girondist" politicians, but survived their fall in 1793.

The second of the two protagonists is Augustin (de) Barruel (1741-1820). The abbé Barruel had been a Jesuit until the suppression of the order. He was a well-known journalist and writer even before publishing his *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* in 1797, and was particularly active in combatting religious skepticism. He asserted that the French Revolution was the result of intentional subversion carried out by several different groups over multiple centuries. According to Barruel, a "secret war of illusion, error and shadows" was waged discreetly in secret societies, and out in the open by radical writers who spread revolutionary ideology and criticised the *ancien régime* (Barruel 1803e: 286-287).

Barruel's overarching theory was divided into multiple smaller conspiracies that intersected and eventually coalesced in the revolutionary Jacobin club. Ancient heresies, Enlightenment philosophes and the Illuminati are all held responsible for the rise of religious skepticism and hostility to

Christianity, monarchies and class hierarchies. According to Barruel, Freemasonry was used to cover these conspiracies while they recruited members from the lodges (1803e: 302). The overarching theory is divided into multiple smaller conspiracies that intersect and eventually coalesce in the revolutionary Jacobin club. Ancient heresies, Enlightenment philosophes and the Illuminati are all held responsible for the rise of religious skepticism and hostility to Christianity, monarchies and class hierarchies.

According to Barruel, Freemasonry was used to cover these conspiracies while they recruited members from the lodges (1803e: 302). This "secret war of illusion, error and shadows" was waged in secret societies, and out in the open by radical writers who spread revolutionary ideology and criticised the *ancien régime* (Barruel 1803e: 286-287). He believed that higher degrees contained heretical ideas passed down from the Knights Templar, who in turn received it from older heretics. He claimed that Manichaeism was the original source for these heretical secret societies, who had covertly undermined Christianity for centuries, but that the heretical origins of Freemasonry had been kept hidden from initiates who only received the three first degrees. Consequently, his opinion was that most Freemasons were completely innocent. France was an exception to this rule, as Barruel accused the subversive Order of the Illuminati of infiltrating and taking over French Freemasonry. Beginning in 1787, he alleged that infiltrators had turned the entire organisation into a revolutionary one.

The following subchapters will focus on some of the groups that played a role in some of the conspiracy theories discussed in this thesis. I will focus on aspects that inspired or were used as evidence for these conspiracy theories.

1.3.1. Jesuits

This subchapter will discuss the history of anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories in France. The Society of Jesus, founded in 1540 by Ignatius of Loyola, is a Catholic religious order most known for its missionary and educational work. The order was suppressed between the years 1773 and 1815, which includes the time of the French Revolution. Because the order and its various controversies nevertheless played multiple roles in the conspiracy theories discussed in this thesis, those controversies and their causes will be discussed in some detail below.

Augustin Barruel was a former Jesuit whose life was turned upside down by the suppression of his order in 1773. He believed that this event was part of a plan to attack Christianity as a whole, by eliminating an order that provided efficacious support for the Catholic Church (Barruel 1803a: 58-78). Nicolas Bonneville (1788), on the other hand, was the author of a book accusing the Jesuits

of infiltrating Freemasonry as part of a sinister plan. As will be discussed in the "Crypto-Catholic plot myth" subchapter, similar beliefs were spread by multiple members of the Illuminati. Barruel found clear similarities between his own accusations against the Illuminati and the accusations made by the Illuminati against the Jesuits, writing that it was almost as if they had taken an account of their own plans and simply replaced "Illuminati" with "Jesuits" (Barruel 1803e: 17-20). This observation was far from new. Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Illuminati, did point to the Jesuits as a source of inspiration (Weishaupt 1787: 28-29).

1.3.1.1. French Jesuits and the Wars of Religion

In 1610, the Jesuit Pierre Coton wrote an open letter to the queen of France to defend his order from accusations of causing the recent murder of king Henry IV. In the pamphlet, Coton complained that the "little society" he belonged to was more defamed and more hated than any other order (Coton 1610: 25). This was no exaggeration. Coton responded to hostile opposition that had begun almost immediately after the Society of Jesus had come to France. As a newly formed order with the ambition to open schools funded by alms, the Jesuits irritated established educators and other orders who didn't appreciate competition for students and donations. In 1554 the Sorbonne's faculty of theology and the bishop of Paris attacked everything from the name "Society of Jesus" to the insufficiently monastic rules governing the members' lifestyle (Fleury 1761: 185-197). Two centuries later, these early opinions were used to argue that flaws perceived later in the order's history were the inevitable result of its constitutions (La Chalotais 1762: 73-74).

After the Wars of Religion, the Jesuits were given a disproportionate amount of the blame for the actions of the Catholic League from 1576 until the end of the war in the 1590s. The League's war against two French kings had been supported by both Spain and the papacy. The Society of Jesus was one of the religious orders that supported the rebellion, and was later accused of holding onto theological arguments used by the League to justify fighting their king.[3] Most importantly, the Jesuits were suspected of teaching that a king could be deposed or killed by his subjects. In 1594 lawyer Antoine Arnauld, petitioned the Parlement to expel the Jesuits as a danger to society and the life of the king (Arnauld 1827). In this case, Arnauld spoke as an attorney for the University of Paris

[3] How later public opinion in France judged the League is illustrated by how it was discussed by Jesuit historian Gabriel Daniel (1649-1728). Before stating that the Jesuits had actually been less reprehensible than some other orders, Daniel preemptively defended himself from accusations of partiality. He pointed readers towards an earlier chapter, which contained a matter-of-fact account of the League and its machinations to gain international support. Having mentioned that a Jesuit had been involved in negotiation international support for the rebellion, Daniel used this as evidence of his own willingness to tell the truth at his order's expense (Daniel 1713: 1703-1704). Clearly, involvement in the creation of the League was compromising enough more than a century later that a biased writer would be expected to shy away from revealingit.

in this case, but he would continue to attack the Jesuits after the case was over (Arnauld 1610). Similarly, Arnauld's fellow lawyer Estienne Pasquier (1602) published a particularly successful book against the Jesuits after representingthe University of Paris in a 1564 case against the Jesuits. Pasquier later reused his pleadings from the case to criticise the Jesuits in another of his books (Pasquier 1633: 315).

Only months later, events gave credibility to Arnauld's accusation. Henry IV, recently converted to Catholicism, had not yet been recognised by the pope as the rightful king of France when he was stabbed by a young man named Jean Chastel. When interrogated, Chastel said that the Jesuits – his former teachers – were among those who had told him that killing the excommunicated and deposed king would be meritorious. The death sentence against Chastel and father Guignard, a Jesuit found with a piece of seditious writing after the murder, also exiled the Jesuits as "corruptors of youth" and enemies of the state (Gazaignes 1764: 583-584). This accusation was inextricably linked to the right claimed by popes to depose monarchs, which implied a right to resist the power of a deposed king once he no longer had the divine right to rule. In the eyes of Catholics who denied the legitimacy of this deposing power, any defense of these claimed rights amounted to a justification of rebellion and even regicide. Rejecting the pope's power over monarchs was the only acceptable position in France after the League was defeated, but in some other countries both papal deposing power and its logical consequences were entirely uncontroversial. As a result of this international variation, French enemies of the Jesuits could easily compile long lists of quotes from Spanish and Italian Jesuits advocating opinions stigmatised as immoral and treasonous in France (*Extrait des assertions* 1762: 90-393).

At the pope's request Henry IV reestablished them in France in 1603. One of the conditions for their return was that one Jesuit would be sent to court to serve as a preacher and to answer for the actions of the others (Gazaignes 1765: 14). In other words, the king wanted a hostage. Father Coton, who had negotiated the conditions on the Jesuits' behalf, was chosen. The requirement to deliver a hostage soon developed into the tradition of appointing a Jesuit as the king's confessor, leading Voltaire to remark that the real reason for the Jesuits' greatest source of pride was father Guignard's hanging in 1594 (Voltaire 1838: 638).

As Coton's complaint quoted earlier in this subchapter shows, the presence of Jesuits in France remained controversial. When Cardinal Bernis (1715-1794) wrote an account of their 1763 expulsion from France, his list of their enemies named Louis XV's mistress, her friends, the secretary of state and "the whole nation" (Bernis 1878: 102). His impression that the Jesuits were hated by the whole country was echoed in 1761 by apostolic nuncio Pietro Colonna (Theiner 1853: 27-28).

Anti-Jesuit sentiment in France only intensified in light of their apparent immunity from consequences that might be expected from such backlash. As Jesuit apologists were happy to point out, they obviously had friends in high places. From their perspective, the protection of popes and kings was itself evidence that this protection was well-deserved ([Nouet et al.] 1658: 467-468). When Blaise Pascal, their most famous critic, wrote in an open letter that the Jesuits acted as they did because they mistook their credit in the Church for impunity, his interlocutors called this accusation their best possible defense: "Could vice have credit, where sanctity reigns?" ([Nouet et al.]: 338-339). Others judged the situation differently, seeing the protection they received as the result of their undue influence. When hostility against the Jesuits was countered with open declarations of support from authorities, this only strengthened the case against them by appearing to prove their power over ecclesial or secular authorities.[4]

As Julien Giry writes, the influence attributed to the Jesuits was the foundation that later conspiracy theories were build on (Giry 2015 : 216). However, that observation doesn't say anything about whether or not those allegations were incorrect and irrational to begin with. As the quotes in the above paragraph show, the Jesuits themselves believed that they had enough "credit" to outweigh that of a large number of enemies. Shortly before their expulsion from France in 1764, they still believed that a court case would be easier to win because the judges were former students (van Kley 2018: 126). They were mistaken, but the king did what he could do help them until public opinion forced him to expel them. His minister of foreign affairs explained that the king had protected them because he still regarded the Jesuits as beneficial to society (Theiner 1853: 54), but there is no real contradiction between accepting this account of his motivation and the interpretation that this was the result of the Jesuits' influence. Unlike groups with no friends in high places, the Jesuits had the privilege of presenting their side of the story to whatever authority figure would decide their fate, as well as the fates of their enemies.

The events of the order's early decades caused a lasting rift between the Jesuits and adherents of the "Gallican" Catholicism dominant in France. Gallicanism, in contrast to "Ultramontanist" Catholicism, was distinguished by the limited power accorded to the papacy, and by its rejection of ecclesial power over the state (van Kley 2018: 15-16). Over time, the conflict between Jesuits and Gallicans mutated into the conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists. Historian Dale van Kley places the Jansenist controversy "at the source of the fragmentation and politicization of Gallican

[4] For example, the universally negative reaction to the Clement XIII's expression of support for the Jesuits following their expulsion from France, Spain and Portugal. The public correctly surmised that his *Apostolicum pascendi* had been requested by the Jesuits themselves. Its publication did nothing but serve as an example of Jesuits getting what they wanted from the pope (Theiner 1853: 61-67).

discourse", writing that it "added a moral and theological layer to Reform Catholicism's anti-Jesuitism, one that cast the Jesuits as the persecutors not only of Protestants but of Catholics" (van Kley 2018: 32).

In one of his books about the Jesuit-Jansenist conflict, Dale van Kley writes that "[w]hile the Gallican tradition had existed long before the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits had celebrated their centennial anniversary when 'Jansenists' came on the scene. So Jansenists defined themselves against Jesuits from the outset, while Jesuits returned the compliment, inventing the term 'Jansenists' to categorize these new enemies as a sect" (van Kley 2018: 33).

1.3.2. Jansenism

From the middle of the 17th century, the history of anti-Jesuit sentiment is inseparable from the history of Jansenism. Dale van Kley describes Jansenism as one branch of international Reform Catholicism in the Age of Enlightenment. Reformist Catholics across Europe had both Gallican and anti-Jesuit tendencies.

In its early years, the Jansenist movement was supported by multiple French bishops. Over time, however, Jansenism lost institutional influence as the intensely anti-Jansenist Louis XIV used his influence over episcopal appointments to exclude Jansenists from the upper ranks of the ecclesial hierarchy (van Kley 2018: 21). For most of the 18th century French bishops were deeply hostile to Jansenism, but the Jansenists found strong support elsewhere. The *parlements*, regional courts with enough power to cause serious difficulties for the king, tended to lean Jansenist. According to Dale van Kley, the monarchy's dependance on both bishops and parlements, two powerful corporations in opposition to each other, helped to create "the eighteenth century's most virulent and obdurate religious controversy" (van Kley: 282).

This intensely acrimonious conflict continued as other countries gradually put to rest what remained of the religious struggles from the 16th century. Meanwhile, the French Enlightenment took on a uniquely irreligious character, symbolised by the *Encyclopédie*. Van Kley argues that the controversy around Jansenism had helped to make France particularly receptive to religious skepticism, by lending support to claims that belief in Christian dogma caused civil unrest (van Kley: 282-283). As historian Sebastian Merkle puts it, when "Catholics and Huguenots, Jansenists and Jesuits, Molinists and Thomists appealed to the same revelation or the same ecclesial authority to denounce and denigrate each other, Encyclopedism drew the conclusion that in the end all of them were right" (Merkle 1909: 48).

1.3.2.1. The Formulary Controversy

Questions on the subject of grace and predestination became the theological focal point of the controversy. Jansenists rejected any attempt to "soften" the idea of predestination by considering human choice or effort as the cause of anyone's salvation, arguing that those choices and efforts had to be the result of grace. They opposed the Molinist school, named for Jesuit theologian Luis Molina (1535-1600). Molinists believed that grace gave everyone the ability to act for their own salvation, and saw free will as a cause of individual differences (Kostroun 2011: 3). Molinist theology was supported by a sufficient number of Jesuits to be firmly associated with the order as a whole (van Kley 2018: 72).

Hostile observers characterised Jansenism as the crypto-Calvinist invention of Cornelius Jansenius (1558-1638), which is why they were assigned a label derived from his name. However, the Jansenists themselves accepted neither the name nor Jansenius' alleged leadership. "Jansenism" was defined by its opponents, as nobody identified as a Jansenist. The definition revolved around five propositions that Jansenius was posthumously condemned as the author of. Jansenists rejected the five propositions as heretical, but defended Jansenius by arguing that he had been falsely accused of spreading heresy. They pointed out that the five condemned propositions were never written by Jansenius himself, but by a critic who had paraphrased him in an unflattering and ambiguous way (Kostroun 2011:39-48).

For those on the Jesuits' side of the conflict, this defense was itself heretical. Questioning the fairness of the condemnation meant questioning the Church, which meant doubting its teaching authority. As a countermeasure, ecclesiastics and members of religious orders were made to sign a "formulary" declaring not only their rejection of the propositions but also their belief that the propositions were an accurate interpretation of Jansenius' book. This formulary spawned its own set of controversies, including debates between different groups of Jansenists (Kostroun 2011: 112-120).

Jesuit historian Gabriel Daniel (1649-1728) wrote a book in the form of an open letter to a Jansenist friend, in which he argued against the validity of the Jansenist position. One particularly striking argument used Daniel's interpretation of what someone would have to think about the Catholic Church if the Jansenists were right in refusing to sign a formulary affirming that they believed that the five condemned propositions accurately summarised Jansenius' book.

> [The Church] obliges you to believe that the five propositions were condemned in the sense of Jansenius' book: so express in speech, or in writing, your sentiments on the matter; say, if you dare, that yes the Church declares that by condemning the five propositions, her intention was to condemn the doctrine of Jansenius. But I don't want to nor do I have to believe it; & even if I believed it, I am persuaded that she is mistaken in this

> condemnation, despite all of the care that she took to examine the matter. I haven't read Jansenius' book, but M. Arnaud [sic] tells me, that the five propositions are not this Author's doctrine; I have more faith in him than in her; she claims an authority over my spirit that she does not have; she exercises a tyranny towards me by striking me with anathema; she abuses her power over the faithful; she is for them a source of scandal; her unjust Formulary on this point only serves to force them to a perjury that damns them; she calls heretical a Book that contains the pure doctrine of the ancient Church; she makes her children regard as a poisoned well, the doctrine of saint Paul & of saint Augustin, which this book contains; she has been deceived, or she is deceiving us (Daniel 1715: 23-24).

Daniel then explains that the addressee must be horrified to see the blasphemy implied in her refusal to sign the formulary, and quotes Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's conclusions against Protestant doubts over the infallibility of the Catholic Church: "Those who fear that the Church would abuse her power to establish a lie have no faith in the one she is governed by" (Daniel 1715: 24-25).

The basis of Daniel's argument was that the implications of insisting that the Jansenists were right would be too terrible to continue disobeying after this had been pointed out. Many did have the exact reaction that he depicted as the logical conslusion to the Jansenist position, but unlike Daniel they didn't see this as a reason to reject it. From a Jansenist perspective, ecclesial authorities who sided with the Jesuits pushed their power past its lawful limits by forcing subordinates to subscribe to the allegation that Jansenius had taught heresy. To those who opposed the formulary, forcing them to sign meant forcing them to bear false witness and perjure themselves by swearing to an accusation that they believed was false (Kostroun 2011: 112-120).

1.3.3. Freemasonry and Catholicism

Freemasonry was an important feature of social life for 18th-century Frenchmen of certain classes. Masonic lodges had developed out of English stonemasons' guilds that had begun to accept members from other professions. After 1717, "grand lodges" were created to organise individual lodges into nation-wide organisations. Freemasonry spread from England throughout Europe, and became highly popular in France. Beginning in 1773, the *Grande Loge de France* faced competition from the Grand Orient de France (GODF). After the Revolution, the GLDF was absorbed by the GODF.

In the 19th century, the GODF developed a particular role in French politics as a force for secularisation (Snoek & Bogdan 2014: 29). The Catholic Church had condemned Freemasonry long before the anti-clerical turn of French Masonry. As will be seen below, however, the condemnation wasn't necessarily known to Catholic members until long after the ban. Consequently, it can't be presumed that they intentionally disregarded the condemnation.

In 1738, pope Clement XII published the first of many papal denunciations of Freemasonry. The bull *In eminenti apostolatus* excommunicated all Freemasons, and listed various reasons for doing so. Masonic lodges keep secrets, and must therefore have something to hide, and Freemasonry accepts members of different religions. The most intriguing cause for the condemnation, however, is the one that is left completely unexplained. Pope Clement simply claimed to know of more good reasons, which has been interpreted in a number of different ways. In a conversation with Freemason Jean Baylot, Jesuit priest Michel Riquet downplays the importance of this phrase. According to Riquet, its inclusion in the bull was the result of stylistic convention. Rather than imply that some information had been withheld from the reader, Riquet explains that papal bulls used it to mean that the text of the bull shouldn't be taken as an exhaustive list of all possible arguments in support of the decision (Baylot & Riquet 1968: 17-18).

While later French history would feature conflicts between Masonic lodges and the Catholic Church, those who joined in the 18th century had no reason to consider their initiation to be subversive. The early papal condemnation of Freemasonry might give the appearance of consistent hostility between the Church and lodges, but many French Freemasons were simply unaware that these bulls existed. François-Marie de Chefdebien d'Armissan had been a Freemason for decades when he learned of the papal condemnation in 1806. In a letter to a fellow Freemason, he wrote that he had seen the bulls printed in anti-Masonic literature but dismissed them as forgeries. He asked the recepient to ask another Mason, a priest named d'Alès-Bermond d'Anduse, to confirm if these bulls were authentic and whether or not they required Catholics to leave Freemasonry. According to Chefdebien, many of his friends refused to have anything more to do with Masonry after learning of the ban on membership (Fabre 1913: 424-425). This letter shows that even Catholics who were careful to follow the rules could be Freemasons. Their membership can't be interpreted as an act of defiance, since they were obviously unaware of the condemnation before that point.[5] Presumably, Chefdebien's friends weren't the only Freemasons who didn't know of the bulls, and intentional disregard for the pope's authority on the part of other contemporaries can't be assumed based on papal condemnations alone.

[5] Even after the abbé d'Alès had confirmed the authenticity of the bulls, while also stressing that they weren't legally binding for French Catholics, Chefdebien saw no real conflict between Catholicism and Freemasonry. In a later letter to d'Alès, he suggested that the Grand Orient de France could request the revocation of the bulls. Either the ban could be declared unapplicable to contemporary Freemasonry, or the bulls themselves could be invalidated as having been inspired by misinformation (Fabre 1913: 435-436).

1.3.3.1. Organisations and Degree Systems

Freemasonry uses symbols and ritual to tell stories or express beliefs and values. This information is divided into degrees, which are presented to new members in a certain order. A few decades into the 18th century, three degrees had become universally accepted. These degrees – Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master – are collectively called craft degrees, among other names. The degrees that aren't universal are often called higher degrees (Snoek & Bogdan 2014: 17-24).

Higher degrees are grouped together into rites and systems, and different systems can contain mutually exclusive versions of Masonic legendary history. One of them, the Strict Observance (SO), led by baron Karl Gotthelf von Hund until his death in 1776, had a particularly influential system of internal secrets. The Strict Observance considered itself a surviving remnant of the Knights Templar, secretly preserved following the suppression of the order in the 14th century following accusations of heresy. Its visible leader, von Hund, claimed that he acted on orders from someone else. These secret leaders were another layer of mystery added onto the secrecy that already existed in other forms of Freemasonry. According to Tim Berndtsson, the SO and some similar organisations

> changed the rules of the game, with their concept of the "Inner Order" into which only some of the Master Masons of regular masonic lodges were inducted. And above the visible leaders of the Inner Order, were, then, the "Unknown Superiors", with whom even the members of the highest degrees professed themselves to have no direct contact. Since secret followed upon secret, the processing of members between the poles of secrecy and disclosure could, in theory, be repeated almost infinitely (Berndtsson 2020: 161).

Alongside competing legends, higher degrees can contain contradictory values and beliefs. As with the legendary histories, these degrees tended to present their claims as ciphers that could decode the craft degrees. Two examples of this will be discussed in the next subchapter, where they will be used to discuss higher degrees in relation to conspiracy theories, and Freemasonry in general in relation to religious skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment.

1.3.3.2. Religious and Ideological Content of Higher Degrees

The incorporation of degrees into the structure of the conspiracy is a common feature of anti-Masonic conspiracy theories (Dyrendal 2020: 374). In light of their importance to conspiracy narrative, this subchapter will discuss how claims made within the degrees themselves have been used as supporting evidence for various allegations. Many conspiracy theories claim that higher degrees provide insight into more explosive secrets only hinted at in earlier rituals, and some 18th-century Freemasons had similar ideas about the relationship between higher degrees and craft degrees. Although higher degrees are newer than the first three degrees, they were often claimed to be older and more authoritative.

Some higher degrees offer explanations for phrases or symbols that every Freemason would be familiar with, and the use of those symbols in the craft degrees has been taken as evidence that beliefs found in higher degrees were implicitly presented even to Freemasons who never received them. These degrees can find radically different messages in the same craft degree, presenting incompatible explanations for the same metaphor. Multiple degrees continue the story told in the Master degree, in which the architect Hiram is murdered by three masons working under him to build the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Some also offer an explanation for what had already been portrayed in the craft degrees.

According to the *Grade supreme de grand êlu de Londres* the Master degree contains a veiled message about grace, sin and salvation. The Jerusalem construction site represents the work of transforming Man into a temple of the Holy Spirit. The architect is the soul, which must control everything the body does. The three murderous masons are three vices (unbelief, superstition and tyranny) contrary to the three theological virtues (faith, hope and love). The moral of the story is that these vices threaten to kill the soul unless they are defeated by the true religion (*Souverain chapitre métropolitain*).

In the *Grade supreme,* the superstition to be defeated is something other than the superstition attacked in a degree named *Chevalier de l'Aigle et du Soleil ou le Cahos débrouillé.* While the *Grade supreme* uses "superstition" to mean reacting to a crisis of faith by hopeless attempts to find salvation through ineffective means, the *Chevalier de l'Aigle* takes aim at any and all exterior acts of worship (*Collection de rituels*… 2006: 50.9). According to one of the passages explaining the lodge's symbols, the figure of a cross surrounded by two snakes represents "that it is necessary to respect common preconceived notions and be careful not to make known what is in your heart in matters of religion and to always appear to be of the same sentiment as imbecils and idiotic followers of religious mysteries".[6] The interpretation of the Master degree matches the values and beliefs presented in this degree. Here, the murder of Hiram is a warning about the dangers of ignorance. Initiates are exhorted to carefully examine other Freemasons before trusting them with an invitation to their sacred sanctuary, and to be ready to die for the sake of the truth (*Collection de rituels*… 2006: 50.4-50.5).

Unlike the *Grade supreme*, the religious perspective of the *Chevalier de l'Aigle* degree has more in common with later descriptions of Freemasonry as a spawning ground for Deists. Christian dogma is said to be based only on preconceived notions and ignorance (*Collection de rituels*… 2006: 50.5),

[6] "Elle nous représente qu'il faut respected les préjugés vulgaires et être prudent à ne pas faire connaître le fonds de son coeur en matière de religion et paraître être toujours du sentiment des sots et des idiots sectateurs des mystères religieux" (*Collection de rituels*… 2006: 50.12)

and the sacred truth shared with the initiate is that God only reveals his commandments in the form of Man's inherent sense of right and wrong. The degree alleges that this was the real secret all along, and the true meaning of earlier degrees that don't express anything similar (*Collection de rituels*… 2006: 50.3). Such a claim obviously can't be relied on as a source of information about other degrees, either their original intentions behind symbols or the reception of the message by other Freemasons, but it nevertheless makes the leap into conspiracy theory as simple as misjudging the reliability of Masonic rituals as sources.[7]

1.3.4. Illuminati

Tim Berndtsson writes that "it is hard not to admit the general correctness of the often repeated observation that Continental European masonry in the 1770s was split between 'rationalists', on the one hand, and 'occultists' on the other", with the Order of the Illuminati as "the most obvious example" of rationalist Freemasonry (Berndtsson 2020: 45-46).

The Order of the Illuminati[8] was a secret society founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, then a professor at Ingolstadt University. This University had been run by Jesuits until the global suppression of the order in 1773. Weishaupt arrived soon after, and his 13 years at the university full of conflicts with the Jesuits there. Weishaupt accused the Jesuits of conspiring to have him removed (1795: 658-659). He called them "friends of night and darkness" (Weishaupt 1786: 52) and accused them of using religion to make themselves shepherds of an easily-led flock of sheep by removing people's ability to think for themselves (60-61). According to Weishaupt, the Jesuits were an important source of inspiration for him. With the Illuminati, he had wanted to create something like the Society of Jesus, but for good people with good intentions (Weishaupt 1787: 28-29).

After Adolph Knigge joined in 1780, the order began a period of rapid expansion. The order was exposed in 1785, and was quickly outlawed in Bavaria. After only a few years of activity, the Illuminati would continue to play an important historical role through the anxiety the order inspired. As Berndtsson writes,

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[7] The abbé Lefranc (1792) used the *Chevalier du soleil*, a less sulphurous variant of the same degree as the *Chevalier de l'Aigle et du Soleil,* as evidence that seemingly Christian symbols had a "true" meaning that secretly denied Christianity. While Barruel correctly stated that the *Chevalier du soleil* degree was too recent to be considered as the inspiration for the older craft degrees (1803b: 205-206), he used other sources much like Lefranc did. His interpretation of craft degrees relied heavily on the Marquis de Condorcet's belief that Freemasonry was related to Manichaeism (Barruel 1803b: 283-288).

[8] The order is often called the Bavarian Illuminati to distinguish it from the Rosicrucians and a number of unrelated groups also known as Illuminati or *illuminés*. This label was also applied to various esoteric movements, and people with bizarre ideas about religion in general (Dictionnaire… 1771b: 72). These movements bear little resemblance to the strongly anti-occult Illuminati, but their name easily contributes to misidentification.

> Even though the organisation dissolved some years after its leaders were banished from Bavaria, texts by and about the Illuminati remained widely available on the book-market. Ideas about the association would continue to haunt European political debates and remain in the cultural memory as a spectre. The Illuminati were nowhere to be found and could thus be suspected of hiding everywhere – as shadowy puppet players behind all possible sorts of social turmoil (Berndtsson 2020: 46).

Like many other groups at the time, the Illuminati had a system of secret degrees. Knigge reworked the order's degrees and grafted them onto the existing structure provided by Freemasonry. However, neither his degrees nor Weishaupt's original version would ever be fully completed or put into practice (Wäges & Markner 2015).

Compared to the lasting impact of the Illuminati's reputation, the order's lifespan was brief. After its founding in 1776, the order survived for less than a decade before being discovered and repressed by Bavarian authorities. Obeying an edict dated 22 June 1784, the order dissolved itself in an attempt to signal a willingness to comply with the law. It did little to help their reputation, however. Documents discovered by happenstance in 1785 revealed that the order had continued its activities in secret (Le Forestier 1974: 476-477). Repressive measures followed, as did the genuine dissolution of the order that year (Berndtsson 2020: 266). Attempts were made to carry on, however. Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, leading the Illuminati in Saxony, refused to give up on their plans. The last signs of life from his continuation of the order came in 1790, three years before his death (Le Forestier: 544-548). He created a French branch in 1787, but there is no evidence of its survival past its founding (Schüttler 1994: 118-119).

1.3.4.1. Deceptive Practices

In a letter to Adam Weishaupt, Adolph Knigge argued that harmless lies could be used to spread the truth, since drawing someone in and gaining his respect with flattering falsehoods would be more effective than trying to attract the wordly using only the truth about the order's goals. Deception was a constant feature of his work for the Illuminati, although he defended himself from accusations of having introduced the practice by pointing to his own experiences as a new member (Markner et al. 2013: 86).

A conflict with Adam Weishaupt made Knigge leave the order in 1784. During this conflict, Knigge wrote a letter to fellow member Franz Xaver von Zwackh, and included a threatening list of things he could do to hurt the order. He hinted that he could bring the attention of Freemasons to "an association" that the Illuminati hid behind. Other points concerned lies told to members about the history of the Illuminati – which was much less impressive than they had been led to believe – and the secrets that members expected to learn some day (Markner et al. 2013: 535-538). Within the

context of 18th-century Freemasonry, tall tales of this kind are exactly what you would expect from a secret society, but other lies mentioned in Knigge's letter to Zwackh were more unusual. He had made people believe that the leaders of the Illuminati were not only excellent people, but that they were powerful (Markner et al. 2013: 536).

Knigge sent Weishaupt a list of similar lies that he had told others, so that the leaders would be able to keep their stories straight. According to the list, members of the Illuminati believed that the order could spread its "bold" belief system because of protection from powerful monarchs. Not only that, but they had the ability to send powerful enemies to prison with only a word. Knigge had even implied – but apparently stopped short of stating as fact – that French politicians were on their side, and that the Emperor himself was following their instructions (Markner et al. 2013: 43). With this in mind, it's hardly surprising that the Illuminati was ascribed greater influence than it ever had in reality. This misunderstanding was intentionally propagated by the order, and even members were made to overestimate its size and power.

These lies explain why the Illuminati was believed to be unrealistically powerful. Others help to explain why that misunderstanding inspired such intense fear and hatred, even among some former members, whose reaction can hardly be explained away as obscurantist opposition to the Enlightened ideals of an order they had chosen to join. In his letter to Zwackh, Knigge wrote that he had deceived members who were working for the order's benefit at that time. Pious members had apparently worried that the order was intended to spread Deism, until Knigge assuaged their fears and made them believe that the leaders of the Illuminati had no desire to undermine belief in Christian dogma (Markner et al. 2013: 536).

As mentioned above, Knigge made members think that "powerful monarchs" were with them, and that their protection allowed the Illuminati to spread "such bold theses" (Markner et al. 2013: 43). Based on the existence of this lie, it seems reasonable to conclude that members were concerned about the legality of their activities. According to the same letter, Knigge had told members that powerful people were beginning to realise that their power was built on sand, and that many of them were working with the Illuminati. This claim, also listed among the lies he had told, shows that members worried about antagonism between the Illuminati and the state. He had to reassure worried members, but apparently couldn't do so without lying.

Based on these lies, I think a number of things can be said about later accusations against the Illuminati. Even without considering the content, the amount of misinformation spread by the leaders clearly justified contemporary skepticism with regards to their later claims of innocence. The original accusations are also understandable, since simply believing in statements made by leaders of the order would result in a classical conspiracy theory. Although the Illuminati wanted "societal reforms,

which from today's perspective appear fairly moderate", as Andreas Önnerfors (2017: 3) writes, Knigge's lies show that even members were uncomfortable with its ideological agenda.

The internal system of deception with regards to the ideological and religious goals of the Illuminati shows that there was something disturbingly subversive going on, even in the eyes of some members. While the systematic use of deception were a likely factor in the development of the conspiracy theories that were to become the Illuminati's most enduring legacy, it also shows how drastically the reality of their influence fell short of the myth. Adam Weishaupt and Adolph von Knigge had radical ideas, but these clearly weren't shared even by all of the order's members.

1.3.5. The Crypto-Catholicism Controversy

Steven Luckert (1993) argues that the early stages of the Illuminati complot thesis was intimitely connected to an earlier conspiracy theory. In the first half of the 1780s, the "Crypto-Catholic plot myth" alleged that some prominent Protestants had secretly converted to Catholicism, and were conspiring with Jesuits to destroy Protestantism from within. The accusation tended to come from adherents to theological tendencies associated with the Enlightenment, and were often directed at more conservative opponents of these newer developments.

Luckert summarises the allegations, which had proliferated among German Protestants:

> Using a vast network of emissaries, dupes, and "Crypto-Catholics," who masqueraded as Protestants, they not only took advantage of the permissive religious policies of enlightened monarchs to proselytize, but secretly worked to undermine toleration and reason. But most startling of all was the dramatic revelation that the Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry, set up various secret societies, and were pulling the strings of these fraternal orders (Luckert 1993: 203-204).

Luckert explains this development as an effect of anxieties experienced by adherents of the Enlightenment when confronted with what they perceived as irrationality in the general public. As Luckert shows, apparently miraculous events, occultism, secret societies and pre-romantic literature charmed some and worried others (Luckert: 203-219). Those who were disturbed by these things "came to believe that the Enlightenment was in grave danger, that it was losing in a life-or-death struggle to the forces of Schwärmerei, ignorance, and superstition, and that all would be lost, if they did not direct public opinion against the plot" (Luckert: 223).

Some members of the Illuminati had contributed to a paranoid search for Catholic infiltrators among German Protestants. Luckert shows that among those who would later go on to accuse the Illuminati of causing the French Revolution, some of the most prominent individuals had themselves been suspected of complicity with this fictitious Jesuit conspiracy. Others were closely connected to

people who had been falsely accused. Luckert concludes that lingering bitterness from the Crypto-Catholicism plot myth was a significant part of their motive when they propagated conspiracy theories about the Illuminati, which gave them the opportunity to persecute their former persecutors.

Nicolas Bonneville was inspired by this conspiracy theory, and wrote a book with similar allegations. He claimed that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry in England, and used symbolism and numerology as evidence (Bonneville 1788). Johann Joachim Christoph Bode translated it into German almost immediately, and had spread similar claims in his own writings. Because of Bode's role as leader of a remnant of the Order of the Illuminati, this has been used as evidence of a connection between Bonneville and the Illuminati (Mathiez 1916: 435).

1.4. Theoretical Framework

As has already been mentioned in the chapter on aims and objectives, the thesis and its theoretical discussion will revolve around the question of whether or not it is possible to explain why some people believe in conspiracy theories. This chapter will discuss the term "conspiracy theory", focusing on the question of how to define it.

The following subchapters will discuss different definitions of the term conspiracy theory. Suggested definitions will primarily be taken from the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Butter & Knight 2020), an anthology of articles written by conspiracy theory researchers from multiple disciplines. The definitions used by the contributing scholars vary significantly, including on the question of whether or not the definition should allow factually accurate or credible theories about conspiracies to be categorised as conspiracy theories. After a subchapter on this question, I will discuss arguments against using conspiracy theory as an analytical category.

1.4.1. Defining "Conspiracy Theory"

According to Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, "[o]ne of the striking features of the scholarship devoted to conspiracy theories is an acutely felt need to define the object of study" (McKenzie-McHarg 2020: 16). The amount of variation between definitions used by various writers leads David Coady to conclude that these writers can't be said to write about the same subject, even though they might see it that way (Coady 2021).

Türkay Salim Nefes and Alejandro Romero-Reche describe a number of different methods used to define conspiracy theories within sociology and social theory. Some researchers use the "I know it when I see it" method, while others use a specific conspiracy theory as an example of what to look

for. A third category lists a set of criteria, and a fourth employs new terminology tailored to a specific purpose (Nefes & Romero-Reche 2020: 96-97).

Michael Barkun formulated an influential list of three characteristics of conspiracy theories: "Nothing happens by accident", "nothing is as it seems", and "everything is connected" (Butter & Knight 2020a: 1). Barkun's three points play different roles in different analyses. Michael Butter and Peter Knight called the list a definition (Butter & Knight 2020b: 28). Barkun himself wrote that his three principles are "found in virtually every conspiracy theory" but defined "conspiracy belief" as "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun 2013: 3-4). Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika used the list as a summary of the assumptions that make conspiracy theories appear rational (Giry & Tika 2020: 115), and Ute Caumanns and Andreas Önnerfors singled out the "everything is connected" aspect as "the basic conspiratorial assumption" (Caumanns & Önnerfors 2020: 448). However, Juha Räikkä and Juho Ritola pointed out that conspiracy theories about all-encompassing conspiracies aren't particularly common (Räikkä & Ritola 2020: 60).

Although these usages are similar, descriptions of the contents of a conspiracy theory and descriptions of the general mentality of a conspiracy theorist are not interchangeable. Presumably, the conclusion that someone believes that "nothing happens by accident" and that "everything is connected" would be drawn based on a stated belief in these principles or an analysis of their opinion on everything and all events. This doesn't appear to be the case, based on Barkun's discussion of a man who argued that the theorised presence of explosives in the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks was supported by the presence of occupants connected to either the government or organised crime. The man's opinion was that this would have made it possible for government agents or criminals to plant the explosives. Barkun used this "as a demonstration of a principal of conspiracy theories", namely "that they assume everything is connected" (Barkun 2013: 174-175).

Instead of representing the conspiracy theorists own understanding of his or her world-view, these traits seem to be considered present when the reader concludes that "things that happen by accident are erroneously taken to be intentional", "theories are believed despite evidence to the contrary" and "unconnected things are seen as connected". Räikkä and Ritola's observation – that most conspiracy theories don't actually connect everything to everything else – doesn't necessarily conflict with Barkun's theory, since he described the totalising conspiracy theory as a result of a tendency to connect everything rather than using the connectedness as a criterion when deciding what to define as a conspiracy theory (Barkun: 69). However, this speaks against the use of Barkun's list as a method to identify something as a conspiracy theory. Rather than categorising conspiracy theories by finding three defining characteristics within statements made by the conspiracy theorist,

the characteristics are inferred based on the presence of a conspiracy theory. This still leaves the question of how to determine the presence of a conspiracy theory unanswered.

1.4.1.1. Are Conspiracy Theories Always Wrong?

One reason for the incompatibility of different definitions is disagreement with regards to the (ir)rationality and (in)accuracy of conspiracy theories. Whether or not factual inaccuracy should be included as a criteria within the definition itself is one question. Another is whether or not conspiracy theories can be categorised as such before being falsified, and then rejected as false on the basis of that classification. M. R. X. Dentith describes three categories of answers to the second of those questions. The first considers all conspiracy theories to be false, while the second sees them as suspect but not necessarily false. Using the terminology of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor, Dentith includes these two positions under the "generalist" label, as opposed to the "particularist" third group that makes no general statements on the truth value of conspiracy theories as a category (Dentith 2018: 94-95).

Spreading and creating knowledge about conspiracy theories as a way to reduce the prevalence of misinformation only makes sense from a generalist perspective. All conspiracy theories have to be incorrect if identifying a conspiracy theory is understood to be synonymous with recognising the falsehood of its claims. One of the problems with this approach is its questionable utility as a tool for countering misinformation. No definition of conspiracy theory could be used to identify false theories while leaving accurate theories about real conspiracies out of the conversation. To consider all conspiracy theories to be false, we would have to assess the validity of a specific claim before categorising it as a conspiracy theory. This would defeat the purpose of learning how to recognise conspiracy theories as a way of identifying misinformation by reversing the steps of that process.

Another problem of primary importance is related to the term's usefulness in research. Dentith, supporting the particularist position, points to the inclusion of irrationality in the definition of conspiracy theory as one of the problems with what he called "conspiracy theory theories"; studying the causes of belief in conspiracy theory using a definition that answers the question is unhelpful (Dentith 2018: 94-97). Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty (2020: 193) also argued against the inclusion of inaccuracy as a criterion, writing that:

> the often-included notion that a conspiracy theory must be factually wrong is neither epistemologically nor pragmatically useful. It introduces the danger of circular reasoning if one seeks explanations of conspiracy beliefs, as confounding conspiracy belief with merely wrong beliefs would make some connections in the literature seem trivial or even tautological. As an illustration, replace the term 'conspiracy belief' with the term 'wrong belief' in an overview of

> relevant findings: Analytical thinking reduces wrong beliefs (Swami et al. 2014). Wrong beliefs are more prevalent among those with lower education (van Prooijen 2016). People who hold wrong beliefs also believe 'bullshit' (Pennycook et al. 2015). People who (wrongfully) believe that objects have feelings also hold other wrong beliefs (Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Douglas et al. 2016)
>
> (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020: 193).

While some have researchers have redefined conspiracy theory to omit falsehood as a criteria. David Coady rejects any attempt to explain the causes of any beliefs without specifying whether or not they're true:

> If you want to explain why I believe that I own a Ford Focus, the first thing you have to do is find out whether I do in fact own a Ford Focus. No attempt to explain my belief that doesn't first settle the issue of whether the belief is true will be credible. This is because, putting aside extremely rare or far-fetched cases of the kind philosophers love to consider when analyzing knowledge, when a person's beliefs are true, that fact is central to any adequate explanation of why he or she holds them (Coady 2019: 169).

In summary, either including or excluding falsehood as a criteria causes difficulties for the resulting definition. In light of this problem, which concerns something that is central to colloquial use of the term and to public policy interest in conspiracy theories, it seems unlikely that any definition will be satisfactory.

1.4.1.2. Should There Be a Definition?

Although he does not oppose using the term, Andrew McKenzie-McHarg suggests that the fruitless search for a definition of conspiracy theories could be an indication that the concept is too complex to be essentialised (McKenzie-McHarg 2020: 16, 26). For the purposes of explaining conspiracy theories, however, I would argue that using the term "conspiracy theory" as an analytical category requires a definition that meets certain criteria.

The need to know which real-world examples we should apply an explanatory theory to makes it necessary to have a definition that can be used to categorise an unknown idea as a conspiracy theory. That theory would only be helpful if it included a definition that can be used to categorise real-world examples with unclear causes. A definition that does not meet this criteria could be accurate, but it would not be useful for the purposes of explaining conspiracy theories. For example, explaining conspiracy theories as the result of anti-scientific sentiment is unhelpful if our definition requires us to determine if a belief is contrary to the scientific consensus before we can categorise it as a conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory category would be superfluous unless we could use more neutral criteria to predict that an unfamiliar belief with an unknown relationship to the scientific

consensus is positively correlated with antiscientific sentiments. In an article already quoted in the the previous subchapter, Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty direct similar criticism against definitions that only apply the term conspiracy theories to false theories. They point out that these definitions are unhelpful, since "confounding conspiracy belief with merely wrong beliefs would make some connections in the literature seem trivial or even tautological" (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020: 193).

Although excluding falsehood from the definition would solve this problem, the resulting definition would have much less in common with what most people have in mind when they hear the term conspiracy theory. Unless the definition demarcates an analytical category that has some overlap with either the colloquial category or with existing scholarly definitions, there is no reason to use the term "conspiracy theory".

On the other hand, adhering to the colloquial definition has its own dangers. The stigma attached to the conspiracy theory label can be detrimental to our ability to understand conspiracy theories or their adherents. In an article criticising Richard Hofstadter's highly influential description of the "paranoid style", Michael Butter shows the harmful effects that early scholarship has had on the historiography of conspiracy theories. Butter argues that accurate research into conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists requires moving away from the generalising and pathologising approach that Hofstadter tends to inspire in his readers:

> It is necessary to consider social, political, and cultural factors and to highlight specific histories, particular experiences, and mentalities to understand why people in certain countries or regions believe in specific conspiracy theories, how widespread such beliefs are and how strategic actors like Trump and Orbán can therefore employ them (Butter 2021: 35).

However, specific cases can be studied without the intermediate step of defining them as a kind of conspiracy theorist. Studying more specific groups or types of conspiracy theorists is also possible, but this does not require using "conspiracy theory" as an analytical category any more than a case study does. Unless an American conspiracy theory in 1770 and a Hungarian conspiracy theory in 2020 have something important in common because they are conspiracy theories, it is unclear to me what knowledge is gained by studying them as such.

Butter's proposed solution seems likely to result in more accurate descriptions and explanations. However, it is not clear to me that it would be more beneficial than the solution proposed by David Coady (2021). In response to attempts to de-stigmatise the term, Coady argues that the result would not be a useful definition. He writes that

> I have come to think that there is no such thing as a correct, or even a good, definition of this term. I hold that we should stop using, as opposed to mentioning, this term altogether. It appears to do no good, while doing considerable harm (Coady 2021).

Compared to abandoning the term as an analytical category, I would argue that a more nuanced approach to conspiracy theories would be preferable only if the ameliorated approach improves our understanding of actual conspiracy theories, as opposed to our understanding of "conspiracy theory" theory. A more nuanced understanding of the term conspiracy theory has no inherent benefit, except to mitigate the damage caused by previous research on conspiracy theories. Coady's solution would achieve the same goal.

For the purposes of explaining conspiracy theories, the utility of the term depends on a definition that can limit the category to theories with one or more shared causes. If the definition does not meet this criteria, any explanation will inevitably be either pointlessly broad or counter-productive. Unless conspiracy theories actually have the same causes, the category is not fit for purpose and any theory about what causes belief in conspiracy theories will be wrong.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, David Coady argues against removing factual accuracy from the definition of conspiracy theory. Because the relationship between reality and an accurate belief is rarely coincidental, explaining beliefs without taking accuracy into account would ignore the real reasons why people have certain beliefs (Coady 2019: 169). Even when explaining only irrational and false conspiracy theories, ignoring the details of what someone actually believes is probably more likely to result in questionable theories. One example of this is Karl Popper's claim that conspiracy theories are caused by secularism. Popper's use of the conspiracy theory category led him to conflate left-wing paranoia about capitalists and the anti-Semitic paranoia expressed in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* a notorious forgery published in the early 20th century. Popper concluded that both of these conspiracy theories were caused by secularism; declining religiosity had caused divine intervention to be replaced by powerful conspirators as the standard explanation for why things happen in the world (Robertson & Dyrendal 2018: 411).

Although the Protocols do portray the threat as coming from human actors, its theme of conspiracies threatening the Catholic Church would indicate that a lack of interest in Christianity was far from a driving force. The same can be said of other similar-sounding expressions of antisemitism from 20th-century Christian authorities (Munson 2018) (José 2013). It seems unlikely that Popper would have suggested secularism as an explanation if he had attempted to explain the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in isolation. By searching for one explanation for disparate ideas, Popper concluded that both were caused by the absence of a religious world-view that is clearly present in his example.

Even in the case of a specific conspiracy theory, finding one explanation for every expression of it seems unlikely. When Jesuits were accused of ordering the murder of French king Henry IV in 1610, belief in the Jesuits' guilt could have had one set of causes and effects among Catholics in

France and another among Protestants in England. Factors that explain belief in the accusation in 1610 might fail to accurately capture the reasons people still believed it in 1770, and someone who believed it after conspiracy theories about Jesuits had ceased to be socially acceptable in the public sphere would not necessarily resemble their fellow conspiracy theorists in either of those two periods. Someone who sought out evidence of a jesuitical plot likely had other motivations than someone who heard about it in passing from a trusted source and simply accepted it as plausible.

1.4.2. Operational Definitions

The term "conspiracy theory" will be used loosely to refer to ideas that have been labelled as such or that resemble common definitions or descriptions of conspiracy theories. When deciding whether or not to call something a conspiracy theory without having an example of any observer labelling it as such, I will use traits that appear to have motivated such a categorisation in other cases.

I will borrow terminology from Steven Luckert (1993) and use the "Illuminati complot thesis" when referring to accusations against this order in particular, and "Crypto-Catholic plot myth" for the anti-Catholic paranoia that preceded the Illuminati controversies.

1.4.3. 18th-Century Definition of "Conspiracy"

The word "conspiracy" will be used as an English translation of the French words *complot, conspiration* or *conjuration*. These had a number of slightly different definitions, and none of them have much in common with how conspiracy theories are perceived in the 21st century. Contemporary definitions need to be clarified before explaining 18th-century belief in conspiracies, and especially before analysing differences between conspiracy theories then and now.

Philippe Buonarroti, a famous 18th-century conspirator, noted that the penal code never clarified what the crime of conspiracy consisted of. A conspiracy was a crime against the security of the state punishable by death, but the law itself did not define the word "conspiracy". While defending himself against the accusation of being one of the leaders of the so-called Conspiracy of the Equals, Buonarroti gave his own definition; a *conspiration* is a "union of wills and forces for the execution of a plan contrary to the law" (*Discours* [1797]: 253).

The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1771) viewed *complot*, *conspiration* and *conjuration* as mostly synonymous. The difference was said to be that *complots* can be formed by anyone with ill intent against anyone, while *conspirations* and *conjurations* always target authority from below. Since a conspiracy can only target the law, the state or the sovereign by definition, no conclusions can be

drawn from the observation that conspiracy theories in the 18th century usually revolved around threats to the status quo.

As for the difference between conspiration and conjuration, both the *Encyclopédie* and the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* saw it as debatable. The *Dictionnaire* proposed that a conjuration is distinct from a conspiration because an oath is sworn by the conjurés to remain united in their goal (Dictionnaire… 1771: 812). The *Enclyclopédie* defined conjurations as smaller unions of individuals, while conspirations could unite an entire population against the state ([Diderot] 1784: 629-630).

Importantly, the 18th century definitions do not take into account how much evidence there is of a conspiracy's existence or if it has been exposed. Any coup or premeditated rebellion is preceded by a conspiracy. Saying that Bolsheviks prepared and led the October Revolution has the same meaning as saying that the October Revolution was a Bolshevik conspiracy.

Based on this definition of "conspiracy", it can't be assumed that allegations of a conspiracy are unfounded or irrational just because the word conspiracy is used. However, the crime of conspiracy was notoriously difficult to prove (de Grati 1676: 45). In contrast to the common contemporary understanding of conspiracy theories as an alternative explanation for a shocking event, the 18th century definition didn't require anything to progress past the planning stage. As Buonarroti and his co-conspirators repeatedly pointed out during their trial in 1797, this made it difficult to distinguish a criminal conspiracy from either legitimate activism or rebellious daydreaming (Discours [1797]).

1.5. Methodology

To answer either of the questions about Bonneville, his writings need to be interpreted to clarify his ideas about what Freemasonry is, and what role it played in bringing about the French Revolution. His intentionally obscure writings need to be deciphered, while Barruel's are generally clearer. This subchapter will be divided into different subheadings according to different guidelines that I will use when weighing possible interpretations of the authors' intended meanings.

1.5.1. Hermeneutic Circle

E.D. Hirsch compared the hermeneutic circle — interpreting one part of the text with interpretative hypotheses drawn from the whole text and vice versa — to the hypothetico-deductive model used in natural sciences. One important difference is that an interpretative hypothesis is constructed based on data that is already available, which makes it more difficult to reject it (Hirsch 1967: 258-264). If a phrase has an unclear meaning, other examples of its use can support or refute an interpretation if the meaning is made clear by the context of the other examples. Assuming that directly falsifying one

alternative hypothesis isn't possible, more probable interpretations should be supported by a greater quantity of evidence drawn from a narrower category of texts (Hirsch: 180-83).

1.5.2. The Principle of Charity

If a text has multiple possible interpretations, a charitable interpretation prefers alternatives where the statement is truthful and the speaker is rational (Gilje 2020: 90). According to philosopher Donald Davidson, the principle of charity is a condition for a theory of interpretation, rather than a preferable alternative. (Davidson 1991: 196-197).

Charitable interpretations that maximise agreement are a way to maximise understanding. Because agreement is necessary for understanding both agreement and disagreement, the opposite approach makes it more difficult to understand either (Davidson: 153). Someone could mistakenly believe the earth was flat, but we can only draw that conclusion if the speaker is otherwise mostly correct about the earth. If there is no agreement at all, Davidson argues, we can't know if they're even talking about our earth (Davidson: 168). If there is no agreement, there can be no meaningful disagreement (Davidson: 196-197).

Philosopher Willard van Orman Quine expresses the reasoning behind the principle of charity in terms of probability. If a statement appears wrong enough, what looks like extreme "silliness" is more likely than not the result of a mistranslation (Quine 2013: 54). In practice, this means that an interpretation that makes the text obviously and unreasonably wrong will be given more attention than other interpretations. When multiple interpretations are possible, a more realistic or rational alternative will be preferred before incomprehensible ones.

1.5.3. Causality

Because two of the three research questions ask *why* these writers held certain beliefs, the interpretation of their texts will be intended to explain why Barruel and Bonneville wrote and believed what they did. The search for an explanation will mostly concern their theories about the relationship between Freemasonry and the French Revolution. If an assertion is factually accurate, I will presume that the underlying facts were the cause of the assertion. As David Coady says, situations where an accurate belief is held for reasons unrelated to its accuracy are mostly found in thought experiments (Coady 2019: 169).

If a statement is wrong, precedence will be given to factors that would explain why it *appeared* accurate to the person who made the statement. Following Nils Gilje's summary of the principles behind hermeneutic intentionalism, the conscious reasons behind actions should be reconstructed

from the perspective of the actor, using the information available to them to explain their actions. A search for unspoken motives or less charitable interpretations is justified if the first option fails to produce a reasonable explanation (Gilje: 276-278). This can be applied to the source material by using historical context to clarify the reasoning behind Barruel and Bonneville's theories. Events or ideas that can reasonably be thought to have influenced them, and that could have made their theories seem rational from their points of view, can be used to explain the beliefs expressed in their writings. Statements that still can't be easily understood as a truthful and rational interpretation of sources the author used can then be explained by referring to possible idiosyncrasies, biases and/or withheld motivations.

1.6. Previous Research

The abbé Barruel's conspiracy theory of the French Revolution has inspired much commentary, including different theories about the causes of his conspiracism. The broader question of conspiracy theories about the Revolution, or conspiracy theories in the early modern period, has been the subject of even more research. This subchapter will only discuss a small selection of the available material. I have chosen to focus on proposed explanations of the specific contents of a conspiracy theory, as opposed to more general theories connecting conspiracy theorising to the time period, e.g. the rise of print media or other features of early modernity. Karl Popper's theory that post-Enlightenment secularism causes conspiracy theories was briefly mentioned in subchapter 1.4.1, and will be discussed again in subchapter 2.1.7., which will argue against this explanation based on a comparison between counterrevolutionary and revolutionary reactions to the murder of Gustav III of Sweden.

The first subchapter will summarise the theory that Barruel's conspiracism was inspired by earlier conspiracy narratives. The second subchapter will discuss the theory that conspiracy theories were common around the time of the Revolution because of the prevalence of actual conspiracies at this time. The third subchapter will discuss the possibility that the conspiracy theory came about because its claims contained some degree of factual accuracy. I have included statements by historians who argue that the Illuminati or Freemasonry probably contributed in some way to the French Revolution, even if they did not tie this contribution to the development of conspiracy theories. Bonneville's claims about Masonic and Illuminati involvement have to be evaluated in light of other evidence, which is also necessary for explaining a possible factual basis to Barruel's theory. Considering the prevalence of unfounded theories on this topic, the subchapter can only discuss a small selection of the available literature. I have chosen to focus on credible evidence of Masonic or

Illuminati influence that will be used to analyse my source material, or evidence that can be reevaluated in light of conclusions drawn from that source material. The final subchapter will return to the Crypto-Catholic plot myth — discussed in subchapter 1.3.5. of the background section — and Steven Luckert's theory of its effects on later conspiracy theories about the Illuminati.

1.6.1. Earlier Conspiracy Theories

According to historian Claus Oberhauser, the common view of the French Revolution as the dawn of conspiracy theorising is mistaken. Conspiracy-based explanations for the Revolution were especially durable, but there were plenty of other allegations of conspiracies throughout early modern Europe and North America. Even during the Revolution, now-forgotten conspiracy theories circulated on both sides of the political divide (Oberhauser 2020: 556).

Other historians explain the conspiracy theory of the Revolution as a product of earlier conspiracy theories with similar traits. J. M. Roberts (1971) argues that Barruel's notoriety has obscured other contributors to the conspiracy theory, and therefore the importance of anti-Protestant propaganda as a source of inspiration. Unlike Roberts, Amos Hofman (1988) considers Barruel himself to have been influenced by anti-Protestantism.

Accusations that Protestants had secret intentions, conspired with foreigners or philosophes, and held antisocial ideologies were commonplace during the debate over religious tolerance that took place in France during the latter half of the 18th century. Protestants were already believed to be plotting against the state and — naturally — the Catholic Church. According to Roberts, conspiracy theory of the French Revolution was the result of adding a new event to an existing narrative (Roberts 1971).

Hofman builds on Roberts' conclusions that the conspiracy theory of the Revolution pre-dated the Revolution itself. He characterises Barruel's anti-Enlightenment conspiracy theory as a secularisation of earlier accusations against Protestant. Based on the existence of older conspiracy theories, which pre-date the Revolution, Hofman rejects the theory that events during the Revolution caused the conspiracy theory (Hofman 1988: 153-154). This theory will be the focus of subchapter 2.2.3. on Barruel's attitudes to Protestants and Protestantism.

1.6.2. Actual Conspiracies

Multiple scholars have argued that the general prevalence of actual conspiracies around the time of the Revolution contributed to the prevalence of unfounded conspiracy theories (Oberhauser 2020:

556). This is one aspect of historian Timothy Tackett's (2000) theory about what caused a paranoid search for counterrevolutionary conspiracies during the Reign of Terror.

In his article about conspiracy theories on the revolutionary left, Tackett examines their causes using the events of the Revolution. He shows that conspiracy theories became increasingly common over time, at least among the educated classes, and concludes from their rarity in the early years that the period as a whole cannot be considered especially prone to conspiracy theorising. His chronology falsifies explanations based on the outbreak of war. Conspiracy theories were widespread already in 1791, and war was declared the following year (Tackett: 708-711). Tackett instead emphasises the importance of real counterrevolutionary conspiracies as a contributing factor to the prevalence of false conspiracy theories. When actual plots were foiled, and then followed by a "general breakdown of order and certainty" (Tackett: 712), revolutionary leaders started seeing conspiracies everywhere.

Tackett concludes that numerous causes contributed to collective and individual paranoia (Tackett: 711). He suggests that the Revolution caused a collective identity crisis for the revolutionaries when their old belief systems collapsed, which explains the gap between real conspiracies and the irrational hunt for conspirators that followed during the Reign of Terror.

1.6.3. Actual Masonic/Illuminati Influence

Albert Mathiez notes that while "certain historians see Freemasonry everywhere, others see it nowhere" (Mathiez 1913: 101), and rejects both extremes as equally ridiculous (Mathiez 1916: 437). Mathiez and others have pointed to some amount of actual Masonic involvement. This could mean that Freemasons or members of the Illuminati contributed directly as actors or indirectly by promoting radical Enlightenment philosophy before the Revolution began. According to Claus Oberhauser, current researchers still vary in their evaluation of the indirect influence of Freemasonry on 18th century thought. However, he dismisses allegations of direct responsibility without further comment (Oberhauser 2020: 562).

Hermann Schüttler (1994) has verified rumours of a French branch of the Illuminati being created in 1787 by Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, who led what remained of the order after its official dissolution a few years earlier. Following a Masonic convention in Paris, Bode and some members of the lodge *Amis Réunis* had agreed on a plan to bring the Illuminati to France under the name *Philadelphes.*Whether or not this branch had anything to do with the French Revolution is a different question. Schüttler notes that the sources proving its creation make no mention of any political goals, and that Bode's Illuminati seems to have faded away after 1787 (Schüttler: 118-119).

Charles Porset counts Nicolas Bonneville as a representative of the Illuminati and their radical

branch of Freemasonry, writing that he gave a "militant expression in the France of the Revolution" of the "egalitarian utopia of the Illuminati of Bavaria" (Porset 2014: 124). Schüttler considers it likely that revolutionary leader Honoré Mirabeau was also a member of the Illuminati (Schüttler: 90).

1.6.4. Earlier Conflicts

As mentioned in the background chapter on the Crypto-Catholicism controversy, Steven Luckert's dissertation on the German origins of the Illuminati complot thesis shows remarkable links between these two conspiracy theories. Luckert argues that this outbreak of anti-Catholic paranoia, which caused significant controversies among German Freemasons in the early 1780s, was decisive in the development of conspiracy theories about the French Revolution.

According to Luckert, the Crypto-Catholic plot thesis caused deep resentment in those of its targets who went on to blame the Revolution on the Illuminati. He concludes that for the German Freemasons who promoted the Illuminati complot thesis "the Revolution was not the cause of the conspiracy theory but rather the occasion for it" (Luckert 1993: 14).

Although it built on pre-existing conflicts between German Freemasons, Luckert argues that the theory served other purposes once it spread to French emigrés opposed to the Revolution. To the emigrés, the Illuminati provided an acceptable explanation for why things had gone so wrong for them. They then combined this new scapegoat with pre-revolutionary fears of Protestantism, the Enlightenment and other real or suspected threats to Catholicism (Luckert: 633).

2. Results

2.1. Bonneville's Conspiracy

This chapter will discuss Nicolas Bonneville's political activities, his history with Freemasonry and the Illuminati, and his impact on the development of conspiracy theories about the French Revolution. I will argue that historical circumstances can explain the origins of the conspiracy theory without resorting to malice or any unusual psychosocial features on the part of the conspiracy theorists.

The fear of an Illuminati take-over of Freemasonry started as a rational search for actual infiltrators that eventually outlived its usefulness. For German Freemasons as a group, a collective reaction in response to infiltration was justified. For many of the individual conspiracy theorists, their personal involvement with the Illuminati can explain why they were particularly concerned.

Only a few years after the Illuminati was exposed, the French Revolution happened. Nicolas Bonneville actively promoted the belief that Freemasonry had caused it in some way, and he later included the Illuminati in his version. He also created an international network to spread revolutionary ideology through Masonic lodges. Bonneville's writings therefore contain both a conspiracy theory of the Revolution and an actual conspiracy, in the 18th-century sense of the term.

This chapter will argue that both his conspiratorial network and his conspiracy theory were essentially fictional, but that the fiction was convincing enough to explain later conspiracy theories.

2.1.1. Bonneville as Evidence of a Masonic Conspiracy

Some of Nicolas Bonneville's influence on the development of the conspiracy theory of the French Revolution is easily explained. He made claims about Freemasonry that are remarkably similar to what counterrevolutionaries would later believe. To Bonneville, the true secret of Freemasonry was politically and religiously explosive. Not only that, but he repeatedly stated that Freemasonry had caused the Revolution, and strongly implied that the Order of the Illuminati was involved. Taking Bonneville's texts at face value would result in something like the counterrevolutionary Illuminati complot thesis. As this subchapter will show, some of his contemporaries did just that.

The abbé Lefranc (1792) was one of the first authors to accuse Freemasons of causing the French Revolution. As his book clearly shows, however, he was not first. Lefranc quoted Bonneville as evidence that Freemasonry had carried out a religious and moral "revolution" in France. In a book published in 1791, Bonneville had written that the time for Masonic secrecy was over because its

goal had been accomplished in France. Significantly, Lefranc called this a confession (Lefranc: 41-42). Lefranc believed that Bonneville had revealed something that other Freemasons concealed. Although he was mistaken, the mistake is understandable considering his source material. Bonneville did claim that the secret purpose of Freemasonry had been to cause the French Revolution. In *De l'esprit des religions* (On the Spirit of Religions) he wrote that:

> If you fear the prejudices of a generation that is ending, may the fraternal societies where the *religion of the law [le culte de la loi]* began, build themselves a centre, a temple of the truth.
>
> Of all the religious or federative systems, the one known by the name *Freemasonry* is the most universal: because nothing should be secret among a free people, and because their purpose has been fulfilled in France, may their temples open![9]

As Susanne Kleinert explains, by "*culte de la loi*" Bonneville meant a pantheistic new societal religion that venerated democracy (Kleinert 1981: 88-93). Bonneville claimed that this religion, which was obviously incompatible with orthodox Catholicism, had begun in "fraternal societies". In the next paragraph, he explicitly named Masonic lodges as one of those societies. He stated that their purpose had been fulfilled in France, which could only be understood as referring to the Revolution.

Bonneville was far from the only Freemason to claim that his ideological or religious ideas were the real secret of Freemasonry, as was shown in background subchapter 1.3.3.2 on the contradictory ideas expressed in Masonic higher degrees from the 18th century. Although Bonneville's writings cannot be used to uncover any hidden truths about the essence of Freemasonry, Lefranc tried to do just that. He wrongly assumed that Bonneville's attempt to propagate his own personal version of Freemasonry had revealed something that other Masons believed without daring to admit it. The abbé Barruel made the same mistake. In his *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, Barruel also described Bonneville's claims about Freemasonry as confessions, presenting a quote from his book as an involuntary admission (Barruel 1803b: 275).

Both Lefranc and Barruel also quoted Bonneville's statements about the Knights Templar. The idea that the Templars, a chivalric order abolished following accusations of heresy in the 14th century, had secretly survived under the guise of Freemasonry was not new. This myth had been spread by Freemasons for decades. After the Revolution, some versions of the conspiracy theory blamed the Templars. Again, Bonneville appeared to provide Lefranc with evidence of this.

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[9] Si vous craignez les préjugés d'une génération qui va finir, que les sociétés fraternelles où le *culte de la loi* a commencé, se bâtissent un centre, le temple de la vérité.

De tous les systèmes religieux ou fédératifs, celui connu sous le nom de *franche-maçonnerie* est le plus général: comme rien ne doit être secret chez un peuple libre, et que leur objet est rempli en France, que leurs temples s'ouvrent! (Bonneville 1791: 91).

Bonneville had pointed to the persecution of the Knights Templar to justify resistance to authority (Lefranc: 84).

The section of Barruel's book about the history of Masonic higher degrees, where he accused not only the Templars but also Manichaeism, primarily relied on claims made by Condorcet, a revolutionary leader and Enlightenment *philosophe.* Condorcet was an associate of Bonneville and — perhaps coincidentally — he had written a text that expressed similar ideas about Freemasonry, which he connected to the Knights Templar and the Enlightenment. Because the text was somewhat vague on this point, Barruel assumed that Condorcet had avoided confirming the role played by the Templars. According to Barruel, however, "the secret that he [Condorcet] only said half of, other adepts have revealed it with less reserve; it escaped them in the middle of their declamations" (Barruel 1803b: 275). The declamation of these other adepts is a quote from Bonneville:

> *You who are or aren't Templars* — help a free people to build in three days, and forever, the Temple of Truth — *May the tyrants perish!* and may the earth by rid of them![10]

Barruel and Lefranc were early and important proponents of the conspiracy theory blaming the Revolution on Freemasons, and both give accurate summaries of Bonneville's version of Freemasonry. These quotes were neither misinterpreted nor taken out of context. In fact, Bonneville found Lefranc's presentation of his writings flattering enough to jokingly suggest that the book could be a ruse to bring "excellent passages" of subversive literature into the libraries of counter-revolutionaries (*Chronique du Mois* April 1792: 115-116).

Barruel and Lefranc found quotes that accurately represented Bonneville's thinking, and they used these to prove their own conspiracy theories. The way both authors used Bonneville's writings illustrates the obvious similarities between their theories and Bonneville's version. Most importantly, Bonneville claimed that the Revolution had been the goal of Freemasonry in France, and that secrecy had only been necessary while this needed to be hidden. The fact that a revolutionary author made these claims gave them authority in the eyes of counter-revolutionaries, especially since it appeared to be a shameful admission made against his own interests. Both Barruel and Lefranc saw the Revolution as a horrible crime, which makes it understandable that they trusted Bonneville's

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[10] "Le secret qu'il n'a dit qu'à demi, d'autres adeptes l'ont trahi avec moins de réserve; il leur est échappé au milieu de leurs déclamations. Dans les transports de leurs fureurs, et comme s'ils étoient encore dans l'antre des épreuves régicides, ils ont publiquement invoqué les poignards et appelé les Frères; ils se sont écriés: "Franchissez tout-à-coup les siècles, et amenez les nations aux persécutions de *Philippe le Bel — Vous qui êtes ou n'êtes pas Templiers* — aidez un peuple libre à se bâtir en trois jours, et pour toujours, le Temple de la Vérité — *Périssent les tyrans!* et que la terre en soit purgée!" (*Voyez Bonneville, Esprit des Religions, pag. 156, 157, 175, etc.*)" (Barruel 1803b: 275).

confession more than the denials of others. However, as will be seen in the next subchapter, Bonneville's use of the word "Freemasonry" is misleading.

2.1.1.1. Bonneville's Definition of "Freemasonry"

Barruel and Lefranc believed that Masonic lodges had turned into revolutionary Jacobin clubs when there was no longer a need to keep secrets. While Bonneville's statements seem to support this, his other writings make it very unlikely that he had anything to do with French lodges or the Jacobins. He implied that the Jacobins were secretly controlled by Jesuits (BdF 1791 #38: 26), a religious order that he both hated and feared.

Judging by the contents of an article attacking Duval d'Eprémesnil, a counterrevolutionary Freemason, Bonneville wasn't involved with "mainstream" Freemasonry when the Revolution began. The article recommends books on the Jesuit infiltration theory, and tells readers that d'Eprémesnil has a book for sale at the Jesuits' old noviciate (Cercle social 1790: 313). Stating that d'Eprémesnil's book was sold in a building formerly owned by the Jesuits was clearly intended to imply that d'Eprémesnil was involved with some Jesuitical plot. After the suppression of the Society in France, the noviciate had been purchased by the Grand Orient de France (Mercier 1781: 332), which means that Bonneville used involvement with the GODF as evidence of involvement with Jesuits. This allegation against d'Eprémesnil shows that when Bonneville mentioned "Freemasonry", he did not mean the Grand Orient.

Susanne Kleinert's 1985 dissertation about Bonneville's writings describe his beliefs in detail. The true religion, according to Bonneville, was a radically egalitarian pantheism that could be found all over the world and throughout history. His writings reference a wide variety of contemporary and historical literature, including pre-Romanticism, English and German poetry, anti-religious polemics, and the Bible (Kleinert 1985: 9-14). Bonneville's interpretation of sources was often at odds with that of his contemporaries, like his assertion that the real message of Christianity is revolutionary propaganda (Kleinert: 135).

There is no reason to assume that Bonneville's version of Freemasonry was more mainstream than his version of Christianity. Perhaps some contemporary Freemasons did share his beliefs, but Bonneville himself did not count the GODF among them. Nevertheless, his writings served as either an inspiration or as support for authors explaining the French Revolution by alleging a Masonic plot, as can be seen by the use of his texts in early versions of the conspiracy theory.

The rest of this chapter will argue that Bonneville's version of Freemasonry was disconnected from reality, but nevertheless became widespread because of a unique set of circumstances that made it appear plausible. I will argue that the conspiracy theorists were motivated by a fear of future

revolutions, and not by a need to explain the causes of the French Revolution. Although Bonneville's false claims about the history of the Revolution were used by conspiracy theorists as evidence, they were probably less important than his hopes for the future. Bonneville attempted to found a revolutionary network, which fits the 18th-century definition of a conspiracy. Perhaps more significantly, he intentionally misled his audience in order to create the impression that this was a vast international conspiracy taking place within Masonic lodges.

By comparing Bonneville's conspiracy to the Illuminati complot thesis, I will argue that certain similarities prove that his activity was misinterpreted as evidence against unrelated groups. False accusations based on this misidentification were central to early versions of the conspiracy theory, while Bonneville gave his own conspiracy as much publicity as possible. Finally, I will argue that the unique combination of these two factors explain the resulting conspiracy theory. Unambiguous evidence was combined with obvious falsehoods, which spurred a misguided search for evidence to prove the latter even after the false accusations had been disproven.

2.1.2. Unknown Superiors

According to Susanne Kleinert, Bonneville's expectations for the post-revolutionary future relied more on Masonic organisations than on the revolutionary state. In Bonneville's vision, Masonic "circles" and the Universal Confederation of the Friends of the Truth would preach "the new, true religion", and work to rebuild the world according to its revolutionary tenets (Kleinert 1981: 122).

Bonneville's network allegedly consisted of two different layers, a secretive inner core known as the *Cercle social* ("Social circle") and a public political club called the *Amis de la vérité* ("Friends of the Truth"). The Friends of the Truth held large meetings in Paris, which subscribers to the journal *Bouche de fer* (BdF) were given complimentary tickets to. The contents of this oddly named journal — Bouche de fer means "mouth of iron" — mostly consisted of speeches held during meetings, along with anonymous texts that were said to have been left in the eponymous iron mouth, the Cercle social's mailbox (Kates 1985).

These two groups were often confused, leading to the name Cercle social being wrongly applied to the Friends of the Truth. According to their writings, published through the *Imprimerie du Cercle social* printing press, the Cercle social had created the Friends of the Truth. These writings also claimed that the Cercle social had access to the real secrets of Freemasonry, and that the group had played an important role in starting the Revolution. Its twelve members were identified only by their pseudonyms, but they supposedly continued to lead the Friends of the Truth from behind the scenes.

Importantly, Bonneville was said to be the Cercle social's secretary, and not one of its twelve

members. In this subchapter, I will argue that this is because the Cercle social was Bonneville's own invention. The group and its twelve members never existed, but Bonneville worked to create the illusion that a mysterious Masonic organisation had contributed to causing the French Revolution.

In late 1789, Bonneville had written an anonymous proposition for the creation of a group called the Cercle social, which was to edify the public and give a platform to ordinary citizens by publishing their writings. A journal called *Cercle social* was published only months later, allegedly by a group of citizens inspired by Bonneville's motion (Lacroix 1898: 564-572). Bonneville's proposition had been shared only with representatives of the Paris Commune, leading both Gary Kates (1985: 55-56) and Sigismond Lacroix (577-578) to conclude that the Cercle must have been formed by some of those representatives. Its limited reach would also be compatible with the Cercle social being fictional, and created by Bonneville alone as a sort of pseudonym.

In the *Cercle social* journal, the twelve members of the Cercle are introduced with pseudonyms and descriptions. Historian Gary Kates accepts the Cercle social's claims about itself. In his book on the Cercle, he writes that the Cercle was a group of like-minded revolutionaries (Kates 1985: 55). Philippe Le Harivel instead writes that all twelve of them sound suspiciously like different descriptions of Bonneville himself (Le Harivel 1923: 50)

An opening statement, allegedly written by the members of the Cercle, claimed that Bonneville's anonymous pamphlet had simply fallen into their hands, and that they had followed its suggestions (Lacroix: 572). In the next issue, the Cercle social published a letter signed by Bonneville. He wrote that he had desired the creation of such a group for years, because he had always known that an organisation would be necessary. He thought the planned institution would be a great benefit to humanity, and was happy to see "worthier hands than [his]" take up the reins (Lacroix: 573). Importantly, he claimed to have sent an updated version of the original proposal along with the letter, and asked the Cercle social to please include it in their journal. At this time, Bonneville pretended to have nothing to do with the Cercle social or its journal.

Kates writes that Bonneville was "obviously" the editor-in-chief of the Cercle social's journal (Kates: 55). Bonneville's distinct style more than justifies naming him as the editor and main contributor. His influence really is obvious, and Bonneville was clearly lying when he denied any involvement in the Cercle's early work.

The Cercle social also claimed Bonneville's contribution to the Revolution, which would have been less suspicious if he had acknowledged his membership. The *Bouche de Fer,* a journal published by the Cercle social, claimed that the "first ideas of the necessity of arming all citizens" to

protect the beginnings of the Revolution had come from the Cercle social.[11] As a member of what was to become the Paris Commune, Bonneville had been the first to suggest forming a national guard. Because of this, he was credited by some contemporaries with being the first to call for armed revolution (Hervier: 10-11).

Eventually, an issue of the eponymous journal claimed that the Cercle had chosen an outside editor, who remained unnamed (Cercle social 1790: 243). Considering the circumstances of this statement, this declaration is suspect. The existence of an editor being recruited is revealed in a letter to Goupil de Préfelne, who had approached an editor to become a member. Bonneville's involvement had become known to someone, and portraying himself as a mere editor working for the Cercle was probably a way to admit as little as possible about his own role. The same letter also explains that the Cercle "believed it important for the GRAND ENTERPRISE, which it conceived, to remain absolutely unknown" (Cercle social 1790: 243). If Bonneville had invented all of the members, that would certainly explain why they had to remain unknown.

The fact that Bonneville claimed not to be a member of the Cercle social indicates that the Cercle was something like the "Unknown Superiors" allegedly leading other mysterious societies at the time. Invisible leaders were said to communicate with the group only through a visible middleman, who could be suspected of inventing the Unknown Superiors to give legitimacy to his own ideas. The Masonic Strict Observance rite is probably the most notable example, but as Claus Oberhauser puts it, "the late eighteenth century was obsessed with the idea of 'unknown superiors' in possession of powerful secrets" (Oberhauser 2020: 560). Bonneville's writings about the Cercle social are extremely self-referential, and gaining an audience would probably have been impossible if his beliefs about his own role had been explicitly stated. Without naming himself, he gave himself credit for the French Revolution and for the future world republic that he hoped to found. Hiding his identity was obviously distressing, and he repeatedly expressed hopes for future recognition and vindication. One example can be found in an anonymous letter written by Bonneville after the controversy over an autobiographical article.[12] The anonymous letter defends Bonneville, saying that he can't be suspected of egoism for not revealing the full truth before people are ready. Criticism from "a handful of men" is unimportant, the letter says, because one day the world will know that "it

[11] "C'est encore du sein du Cercle Social que partirent les premières idées de la nécessité d'armer tous les citoyens pour empêcher les guerres civiles, la perte d'un Roi-citoyen, et de l'Assemblée auguste des envoyés du Peuple Franc." (Bdf 1790 #2: 5)

[12] This text, referred to as the "Rousseau" article, is discussed in more detail in the last chapter.

was *he* who conceived in his heart the *universal* federation of the friends of the truth, it was *he* who executed it".[13]

2.1.3. Cercle social and Amis de la vérité

Between October 1790 and July 1791, the Cercle social *s*upposedly led another group called the Universal Confederation of Friends of the Truth. This was clearly a real organisation. Open meetings were held in the *Cirque,* a building at the *Palais Royal* in central Paris. Kates writes that the Confederation "became one of the largest clubs of the Revolution (3,000-6,000 members) and was famous for its radical views on land reform, religion, women's rights, and democracy", and spearheaded the early republican movement before being suppressed (Kates: 11). To accomplish its political goals, the group reached out to Masonic lodges with the intention of creating a network of correspondents (Brasart 2013).

The *Bouche de fer*, another journal published by the Cercle social, was largely devoted to summarising meetings and publishing texts. Many were obviously written by Bonneville but allegedly sent by anonymous readers. Its style was characteristically mysterious and often referenced Masonic symbolism. Contemporaries were skeptical. Madame Roland, a prominent Girondist, hesitated to associate with the Cercle after hearing that its mysticism discredited the group in the eyes of the public (Roland 1835: 185). Masonic references were so prominent that the Friends of the Truth has been described as a Masonic lodge, which Patrick Brasart dismisses. Based on an analysis of Bonneville's writings, Brasart suggests that his language and symbolism isn't as Masonic as has sometimes been assumed (Brasart 2013).

As with the use of Bonneville's writings as evidence of Masonic involvement with the Revolution, almost no effort was needed to find similar statements about ongoing subversion outside of France. Bonneville openly advertised his attempts to create a revolutionary network of Masonic lodges, both nationally and internationally. Its goals could hardly be misinterpreted. In his *Bouche de*

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[13] "*Les tyrans sont mûrs.* Les hommes ne sont pas mûrs encore pour toutes les vérités. --- Jeune homme, tu possède des trésors de *vérité*, ton ame a besoin de les répandre, elle est avide de la félicité de tes semblables. Sois moins prodigue de ce trésor, ne le verse qu'avec prudence pour qu'ils en fassent un digne usage.

L'artiste appellé auprès d'un malade, pour arracher le voile qui le prive du sens de la vue, ne lui montre pas tout-à-coup la lumière; ce n'est que par degrés qu'il le prépare à cette grande jouissance. Imite son exemple, ne crains pas d'être accusé d'égoïsme: ce n'est pas toi qu'on peut en soupçonner. Et que t'importe l'opinion d'une poignée d'ommes, lorsque la voix secrette [sic] de ta conscience te répète à chaque heur, à chaque minute.----*Tu veux le bien, tu fais le bien.* Que t'importe, lorsque tu dois savoir que tous les *francs frères* répandus sur le globe veillent sur toi; qu'ils diront un jour à l'univers:---Vous l'avez persécuté, opprimé, méconnu; mais ce fut *lui* qui conçut dans son coeur la fédération universelle des amis de la vérité, ce fut *lui* qui l'exécuta.

Peuples de la terre, il vous a rendus libres, bénissez, chérissez sa mémoire" (Bdf 1791 #27: 428).

fer, the bilingual cry "*Unking and Unpriest the earth*. — BE FREE, AND YOU WILL BE HAPPY" was presented as something like a motto.[14]

Texts produced by the Cercle social printing press claimed that the Cercle consisted of twelve members who had founded the Friends of the Truth and continued to guide its work from behind the scenes through its chosen representatives. In Bonneville's characteristically enigmatic style, the relationship between Cercle social and the Friends of the Truth was symbolically expressed by the numbers 12, 13, 14. An article in the *Bouche de fer* translates 12 as "Cercle social", 13 as "social contract" and 14 as "Friends of the Truth" (BdF 1791 #5: 71). Simultaneously, these numbers were used to represent the "three great days" of 1789, which began with a riot and led to the fall of the Bastille on July 14. The Bouche de fer translated the events of those three days as a three-step process of taking up arms, deliberating on the national will and finally executing it. For "enslaved Nations" these days are the "*good news*" of a great victory, because those who know "the past, will predict the future" (BdF 1790 #14: 221-223).

Using the number 12 as code for both "Cercle social" and for the first of three revolutionary steps seems to mean that the Cercle had a role in preparing a Revolution. Something similar appears to be implied by the letter that this article was presented as a response to. The letter was allegedly sent by members of a German Masonic lodge hoping to form their own Cercle social, and requested details on "the manner in which you established your (12)" (BdF 1790 #14: 214). The Bouche de fer answered with a confusingly worded article full of symbolism, as was its wont, but included a footnote promising a private letter. Whether or not the letter was real, the published answer did say explicitly that a Masonic conspiracy was being exported from France to international lodges, and the correspondents were instructed to become more secretive than before. Although revolutionaries in France no longer needed to "fear, as in the past, *a bit of rain*"[15] their meetings would be left in "salutary" darkness to allow foreigners to come and go without being revealed as members. Because of the risk of exposure, the article adviced them to have their "three great days" in secret, so that they could "immediately obey the decisive signal" (BdF 1790 #14: 220-221).

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[14] "*Unking and Unpriest the earth*. — SOYEZ LIBRES, ET VOUS SEREZ HEUREUX" (Bdf 1791 #16: 268).

[15] "It's raining" was used between Freemasons as a discreet warning against saying too much in the presence of non-Masons, according to an exposure called *L'Ordre des Franc-Maçons trahi* (1771: 31). While Bonneville's reference would imply that secrecy was used within Freemasonry to hide something that only became legal after the Revolution, the *Bouche de fer* article also makes it clear that lodges who followed the Cercle social's advice to contemplate the "true *mysteries* of liberty" would be replacing their old "mysteries of fanaticism" with something new (BdF 1790 #14: 220). Together, these parts of the article support the conclusion that Bonneville alleged a Masonic conspiracy but used such an unusual definition of "Freemasonry" that his understanding of this conspiracy had little in common with an average reader's interpretation.

For opponents of his religious and ideological goals, the Universal Confederation of the Friends of the Truth was a threatening prospect. However, the reality of the conspiracy was less formidable than the Bouche de fer claimed. With the help of "charlatanry", as his fellow Girondist François Lanthenas put it, Bonneville exaggerated his international success (Roland 1835: 207). Bonneville had a particular way of writing that is easy to recognise. All of the quotes from this subchapter, for example, are taken from anonymous texts that can be identified as Bonneville's work without hesitation. Many of the letters allegedly received by the Bouche de fer from foreign branches of this network were obviously written by him. These forgeries were created to prove the existence of a massive revolutionary movement, which could have contributed to exaggerations on the part of its opponents.

Bonneville's writings provided illusory support for the conspiracy theory in multiple different ways. As we have seen, his claims were used as direct evidence that Masonic secrets had something to do with the Revolution. I would argue that his claims about the Universal Confederation probably contributed as well, albeit less directly. According to the Illuminati complot thesis, the Order of the Illuminati had spread from Germany to France through Masonic lodges with the intention to subvert the French monarchy. Seemingly credible evidence that revolutionary ideas were spreading through Masonic lodges after the French Revolution would likely have fuelled suspicions that something similar had happened before. More importantly, the "Friends of the Truth" network gave conspiracy theories greater urgency. Evidence of past infiltration was needed not only to explain what happened in the recent past, but also to uncover and stop ongoing infiltration outside of France. In the following subchapter, I will argue that Bonneville possibly also contributed directly to this aspect of the conspiracy theory, since his writings do say more or less explicitly that the Cercle social was connected to the Illuminati. However, as has been shown throughout this chapter, Bonneville is a highly unreliable source.

2.1.4. Was Bonneville in the Illuminati?

This subchapter will argue that Bonneville most likely had no contact with the Order of the Illuminati or its members before the Revolution. However, Bonneville actively worked to give the opposite impression. His writings are not evidence that the Illuminati was actually involved with the Revolution, but it is nevertheless understandable that his contemporaries thought otherwise.

Although the Illuminati complot thesis has been thoroughly debunked, Bonneville and his writings have been used to argue that the Illuminati had some presence in France. Historian Charles Porset, describing the diversity of 18th-century Freemasonry, uses Bonneville to represent the

Illuminati and the radically egalitarian branch of Freemasonry (Porset 2014: 124). Albert Mathiez cites a *Bouche de fer* article from April 1791 as evidence of Illuminati influence on the Revolution, writing that Bonneville's footnotes clearly show that he had first-hand experience (Mathiez 1916: 436). The article does appear to confirm a relationship between the Cercle social and the Order of the Illuminati. However, this interpretation is difficult to reconcile with certain details of the article, which will be discussed below. As with the Cercle social, it seems likely that Bonneville intentionally misled his readers.

The article in question is about the book *De la monarchie prussienne* ("On the Prussian Monarchy", 1788), allegedly written by revolutionary leader Honoré Mirabeau. The real author was Jakob Mauvillon, a Prussian officer and former member of the Illuminati. Mirabeau had hired Mauvillon and paid for the right to claim sole authorship.[16] The book has quite a lot to say about the Illuminati. It includes a glowing review of Bonneville's contribution to the Jesuit infiltration theory, a subject that obviously worried Mauvillon. Considering Bonneville's habit of self-aggrandisement, it seems reasonable to suspect that the real purpose of the Bouche de fer article was to publicise "Mirabeau"'s praise of his own book.

In its discussion of the Illuminati and the Crypto-Catholicism plot myth, not to mention its effusive praise of the Illuminati's political goals, the book is so blatantly partisan that it must have been written by a member of the Illuminati. Mauvillon's authorship means that the book cannot be used as evidence that Mirabeau was a member, or even that he had a particularly favourable opinion of the Illuminati. Nevertheless, Mirabeau's name was on the title page. He claimed authorship, and the book's content therefore gives the impression that Mirabeau — the most important leader of the Revolution from 1789 until his death in 1791 — was a member of the Illuminati. If this had been true, Mirabeau's membership would have meant that the Illuminati actually did have some influence on the Revolution.

Bonneville was clearly under the impression that Mirabeau was the real author. He knew that Mauvillon was the source of information about the Illuminati, but overestimated Mirabeau's contribution. According to Bonneville, Mirabeau had urged "one of [their] mutual Friends"[17] to

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[16] According to Mauvillon, Mirabeau gave him the idea, edited the manuscript and published the finished product. He compared the division of labour to a pregnancy; the mother receives an "imperceptible seed" and does all the work of turning it into a baby, but the baby always carries the father's name (Mauvillon: 1792: XVI). This statement was an attempt to defend Mirabeau's decision to claim authorship, and diminishing Mirabeau's contribution to the book would have been counterproductive.

[17] "Dans ces matières, il avoit grand soin d'interroger un de nos Amis communs, qui ne cédoit qu'avec peine à ses sollicitations" (BdF 1791 #40: 62).

provide him with information. Capitalising the word "friend" implies that Mirabeau's informant — Jakob Mauvillon — was one of the "Friends of the Truth", which seems plausible.

The *Bouche de fer* article was written shortly after Mirabeau's death, and quoted extensively from the book and its chapter on the Illuminati. It states that Mirabeau's final speech will show the Friends of the Truth what a loss his death had been for them (Bdf #40 1791: 63), which means that Mirabeau was not regarded as favourably when he was still alive.

Bonneville added a number of footnotes that imply that the Cercle social was tied to the Illuminati, without explicitly stating it. After quoting a paragraph about goals that members of the Illuminati swore an oath to support — like religious tolerance, freedom of the press, and abolishing serfdom— Bonneville added that Mirabeau called the Illuminati's project "beautiful, noble and great". Bonneville declared that the *Bouche de fer* had worked "with all of its strength" since May 1789 to support "such a noble plan", and invoked the curses of future generations if it has ever abandoned "these principles and its promises."[18] Claiming to follow the order's plans and keep promises made by its members certainly implies membership, but doing so only since May 1789 is incompatible with Bonneville's membership predating his revolutionary activity. Bode's famous trip to Paris, where he founded a French branch of the Illuminati, had taken place two years before this date (Schüttler 1994: 118-119). If Bonneville had belonged to this branch, he could have written truthfully that he had worked for the Illuminati's "beautiful, noble and great" project since 1787.

Elsewhere in the same article, Bonneville refered to the Illuminati "this *reasonable* branch" of Freemasonry, and "*this primitive initiation* of the true emblems of Franks or free men".[19] These are exactly the same words that Bonneville used when writing about the true and revolutionary secrets of Freemasonry possessed by the Cercle social. The idea of a Frankish people was central to Bonneville's belief system. As Susanne Kleinert writes, Bonneville believed that the Revolution would enable a return to the ideal Germanic society of antiquity (Kleinert: 40-45). Bonneville traced Freemasonry and the French Revolution to an ancient alliance of "Brother-Peoples". Since their pact was created to defend their freedom from the People-King — i.e. Rome — they took the name

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[18] "Ce projet continue H. mirabeau étoit beau, noble et grand; et si depuis l'instant où les districts furent convoqués en mai 1789 la *Bouche de fer* poursuivant de toutes ses forces un si noble dessein à [sic] jamais abandonné ces principes et ses promesses

Que son nom soit maudit dans la postérité! "(Bdf 1791 #40: 73)

[19] "C'étoit une règle *fondamentale*, de n'y laisser entrer *aucun prince,* quelles que pussent être ses vertus.

(C'est une preuve que ni Philippe d'Orléans, ni Philippe d'Artois, ni le roi de Suède, ni le duc de Cumberland, frère du roi d'Angleterre, appellés grands maîtres de la mâçonnerie, n'étoient nullement entrés dans cette branche *raisonnable*, ou plutôt *dans cette initiation primitive* des véritables emblêmes des Francs ou hommes libres)" (Bdf #40 1791: 72). The first sentence is Mauvillon's original text, but the emphasis was added by Bonneville.

"Franks", meaning "free men",[20] and gave it to the Gaullic lands they conquered (Bonneville 1792: 322-323).

In light of Bonneville's other writings have to say about "Franks", the passage about the Illuminati and Frankish initiations is both veiled and explicit.[21] Bonneville wrote, in effect, that the Cercle social's Masonic secrets were also shared by the Illuminati. However, this is probably as unreliable as his other claims about the Cercle. Despite Bonneville's efforts, the article highlights differences between his own beliefs and quotes about the Illuminati. Bonneville explains away discrepancies, claiming that Mirabeau received only "vague and general information" because his source feared that Mirabeau would "dare betray the cause of the human race".[22] Mauvillon wrote the book himself, making this justification nonsensical.

Mauvillon mentioned agitation in Germany, meaning the Crypto-Catholic plot myth, and Bonneville adds "Europe" in brackets (Bdf #40 1791: 67). Readers were meant to understand that the original text fell short of the truth because the "mutual Friend" withheld information from Mirabeau, and that Bonneville had access to this insider information. Adding "Europe" further supported Bonneville's assertions by extending the limits of the Illuminati's anti-Jesuit crusade.

Other additions and comments exaggerated Bonneville's affinity with the beliefs and practices of the Illuminati. When Mauvillon mentioned that the Illuminati had wanted to improve the world by advising "sovereigns", Bonneville added "peoples" in brackets to turn the quote into a hidden allusion to popular sovereignty (Bdf #40 1791: 72-73). Mauvillon's statement about the Illuminati's relatively moderate strategy, using soft power to encourage monarchs to make certain choices, turns into a plan to spread revolutionary ideology to the masses.

Another footnote denies the book's statement that initiates swore oaths to remain loyal and work to further the Order's goals (Bdf #40 1791: 72-73). Illuminati initiation rituals really did involve swearing oaths (Wäges & Markner 2015), but Bonneville was averse to the practice. He falsely

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[20] To support this claim he used a partly falsified quote from Samuel von Pufendorf, who directly rejected the etymology attributed to him. Contrary to the statement Bonneville attributes to him, Pufendorf wrote that the Franks ruled Gaul because of treaties with the Romans, and thought the name referenced their barbarity (Pufendorf 1757: 76-77).

[21] Etymology and similar-sounding words were crucial to Bonneville's beliefs about Frankishness and Freemasonry. Because the name "France" comes from the Franks, nominative determinism means that the French people "must begin the universal confederation" (*Mercure de France* 25 December 1790: 151). "Freemason" in French is "franc-maçon". Freemasons call each other "brother", and the Franks were Germanic; the (unrelated) Latin word "germanus" refers to brothers and sisters. The Knights Templar were crusaders, and all Europeans were called "Franks" by Muslims during the Crusades. Consequently, the Templars and Freemasons belonged to the same ancient and brotherly Frankish religion.

[22] "Mirabeau, comme on peu s'en containcre aisément, par le texte d'où nous tirons le morceau suivant, n'avoit que des informations vagues et générales: on craignoit, peut-être à tort, mais enfin on craignoit que par quel que motif plausible il osât trahir la cause du genre humain" (Bdf 1791 #40: 62).

claimed that Mirabeau was mistaken, and that initiates actually promised not to be bound by any oaths, to make it sound like the Illuminati shared his beliefs. Bonneville's dishonesty isn't inherently incompatible with membership, but it does show a willingness to mislead readers about the nature of his involvement with the order. My opinion is therefore that tentatively rejecting his supposed membership seems justified. The following two subchapters will support this conclusion. I will argue that two potential signs of contact between the Illuminati and the Cercle social should be disregarded.

2.1.4.1. Bode's Translation of Bonneville's Book

Bonneville's *Les jésuites chassés de la maçonnerie* was inspired by the crypto-Catholic plot myth in Germany and cited Illuminati sources. Johann Joachim Christoph Bode translated it almost immediately. Bode was the leader of what remained of the Illuminati after its official dissolution, and he was also was responsible for creating a French branch of the Illuminati (Schüttler 1994). Albert Mathiez considers the translation itself to be sufficient evidence to conclude that Bode and Bonneville were in contact (Mathiez 1916: 435). However, as will be seen below there is some evidence that Bonneville was not acquainted with Bode. Because of Bode's importance to the later history of the Illuminati, this would be impossible to reconcile with the theory that Bonneville had been a member of the Paris-based branch of the Illuminati that Bode had helped to found.

In the preface to his translation of Bonneville's book, Bode claimed not to know the author. He apparently assumed that "Nicolas de Bonneville" was a pseudonym, since he wrote that the author was right to hide his identity, but might be French based on his style (Bonneville 1788c: xi). While it's obviously possible for a writer to fake ignorance, I don't see any reason to assume that Bode did so here.

Based on both style and content it's probable that Bonneville was the anonymous editor of Jean-Frédéric Bernard's atlas of religious history. This edition of the book has multiple footnotes that reference and praise Bonneville's 1788 book. To support its credibility, the editor writes that "one of the German translators" could easily be identified "as one of the leaders of the highest Masonry" ([Bernard] 1819: 133). The identification couldn't possibly be difficult if the two already knew each other. Another footnote identifies Bode as the grand master of the Templars ([Bernard]: 188), which strengthens the impression that the editor didn't know much about him. At this point, faking ignorance to protect Bode's identity would be entirely unnecessary. Bode had been death for more than twenty years, and everyone knew that he was the anonymous translator of Bonneville's book as well as a leader of the Illuminati. Bonneville's name isn't mentioned in the 1819 book, which makes it difficult to find any strategic benefit to feigning ignorance.

Although these sources are less than conclusive, I believe that they are enough to justify skepticism with regards to Bonneville's relationship to Bode. Mathiez's conclusion that Bode's translation proves a connection between them appears unfounded, however. Bode's claim that he did not know Bonneville is particularly significant in this context, since lying about it would only have been a rational choice if his translation was actually possible without personal contact between them. Even if his ignorance could have been feigned, it casts doubt on the only clear sign that Bonneville had any contact with the Illuminati before the Revolution.

2.1.4.2. Was the abbé Fauchet in the Illuminati?

Claude Fauchet, a famous Jansenist priest, is the other name almost always attached to the Cercle social. He presided over assemblies at the Cirque, and was supposedly selected by the absentee leaders of the Cercle to speak to the Friends of the Truth in their name. However, Fauchet said that he wasn't a member (Bdf 1790 #7: 111-112), and his denial is more credible than Bonneville's.

In René Le Forestier's history of the Illuminati, Fauchet's name appears on three contemporary lists of alleged members of the Illuminati in France (Le Forestier 1979: 654, 669, 679). Unless he was actually a member of the Illuminati, the fact that he was included on multiple lists further indicates that the Illuminati complot thesis was based on the Cercle social. His prominent role in the Friends of the Truth is, in my opinion, the only plausible reason to mistakenly identify him as a member of the Illuminati.

Fauchet's second speech to the Friends of the Truth at the *Cirque* contains a number of claims about Freemasonry, and some of them could indicate that he knew very little about the Illuminati. Fauchet himself was never a Freemason, as he explained in the speech. He didn't claim any personal knowledge of Freemasonry (Bdf #7 1790: 104). Considering his title in the assembly, "attorney general of the Cercle social", it's probable that Bonneville told him what to say in the Cercle's name. By extension, the speech indicates that Bonneville's understanding of the Illuminati was incompatible with personal experience.

Fauchet's speech describes two categories of Freemasons with radical ideas for the future happiness of humanity. The first category uses honest means worthy of "the beauty of their hopes", and only this group has a complete understanding of the ancient and new mysteries. Those in the second group "appear truly to be the most dangerous of men", because even though their goal is "the reestablishment of all natural and social rights" they try to reach it by "superstitious seduction, terrible destruction, great losses". However, Fauchet went on to say that the second group could be trusted, because they would abandon their "false and cruel means of regeneration" when better methods became available (Bdf #7 1790: 106-108).

The Cercle social was obviously included in the first group, receiving unconditional approval. The second category, described as dangerous but good, might include the Illuminati. My interpretation is based on the hypothesis that Fauchet's speech was informed by a misunderstanding of the word *illuminé*. The ideological goals of the second category sound more like the Illuminati than any other Masonic group, but the same category is also said to use magic and pseudoscience to attract followers (Bdf #7 1790: 106). This is difficult to interpret as a reference to methods used by the Illuminati, but would fit into contemporary reactions to other groups called by the same name in French.

In French, the Order of the Illuminati shares the name illuminés with a number of unrelated groups, like the Alumbrados and the Rosicrucians. The label was also applied derisively to mystics in general (*Dictionnaire*… 1771b: 72). These movements had little in common with the Illuminati, but the name causes confusion. Fauchet described a radically progressive group that relies on superstition and deception, probably because he assumed that the Illuminati were like other illuminés.

Fauchet's response to criticism from militant atheist Anacharsis Cloots supports this interpretation. Cloots had written in the *Courrier de Paris dans les 83 départements* (28 October 1790: 424) that Fauchet "was a Jansenist under the old regime" and "will be an *illuminé* under the new regime". Fauchet responded that he was as averse as Cloots to "the illuminés from Germany, from Prussia and elsewhere, who throw themselves into the most cruel illusions" (BdF 1790 #10: 158). The word choice is similar to the mention of cruel means and superstition in his speech, and it seems likely that this was intended as another mention of the same group.

René Le Forestier (1974: 328) interprets "*les illuminés d'Allemagne*" as a direct reference to a Rosicrucian group called the Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross, but they were never known for promoting radical societal reforms. The Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross was called the illuminés "of Berlin" or "of Prussia", but Fauchet mentioned two types of illuminés, one Prussian and the other German. Bode, himself a leading member, consistently used "German Illuminati" as a more specific name for the Order of the Illuminati (Bonneville 1788b; [Luchet] 1790). If Fauchet knew enough about secret societies of the time to reference any two in particular, the Bavarian Illuminati is the most likely candidate for the illuminés d'Allemagne. The dangerous radicals of the second type of high Masonry was probably also a reference to the Bavarian Illuminati. Fauchet's letter to Cloots probably meant to reject both the Illuminati and Rosicrucians, and he was most likely too badly informed to have been a member of either.

In summary, Fauchet's speech about recruiting particular groups of Freemasons was most likely a poorly informed reference to the Illuminati. This means that rumours of Fauchet's membership in

the Illuminati can probably be rejected as false. Because Bonneville is the most likely source of inspiration for Fauchet's claims about the Illuminati, this also indicates that Bonneville was similarly uninvolved. However, Fauchet was verifiably a prominent member of the Friends of the Truth. The false claims that he was a member of the Illuminati provide further evidence that conspiracy theories about the Illuminati causing the French Revolution were originally inspired by the Friends of the Truth or the Cercle social.

The following two subchapters will continue on the same theme, arguing that the Cercle social was not only confused with the Illuminati, but also with a Masonic lodge called *Contrat social* and the mysterious "Propaganda Club". Although the latter might have been a counterrevolutionary hoax, both misidentifications nevertheless contributed to the conspiracy theory that the Illuminati was behind the French Revolution.

2.1.5. The "Contrat social" Lodge and its Reputation as a Conspiratorial Hub

Many early versions of the Illuminati complot thesis state that a Masonic lodge called Contrat social was the nexus of this conspiracy. Allegedly, the Illuminati had taken over this lodge as part of their project to take over the *Grand Orient de France* and start a revolution. In the following subchapters, I will argue that Bonneville's claims about the Cercle social were the original source for false accusations against other groups. The "Cercle social" was misidentified with the "Contrat social", probably because of their similar names. Even in some versions of the conspiracy theory that do not mention the Cercle social, Bonneville can therefore be identified as the original cause of accusations against others.

If the allegations against the Contrat social lodge were unfounded, as this subchapter will argue, this would remove one of the most well-supported examples of real Masonic influence on the Revolution. Historian Albert Mathiez uses the lodge as evidence of some Masonic involvement with the revolutionary movement. He concludes, based on a letter written by a citizen Le Maire to an anonymous general in 1791, that the Girondins obviously counted on lodges as allies in their propaganda efforts. Le Maire and Dietrich, mayor of Strasbourg, had made a German translation of a text printed by the "L□ [23] de Saint-Jean d'Écosse du Contrat social" in Paris, and thousands of copies had been sent across the Rhine to be distributed among soldiers and sent to the Worshipful Masters of Masonic lodges (Mathiez 1913: 102).

Barruel rejected all accusations of revolutionary activities against the lodge and its members, who Barruel considered to be good royalists. There were allegations that the Contrat social had been

[23] i.e. "lodge"

infiltrated by the Illuminati. Barruel correctly pointed out that this rumour had confused the Contrat social and with the lodge *Amis réunis* (Barruel 1803e: 86-93). The latter had been involved with the Illuminati, and Bode's attempt to found a French branch had won the support of some members (Schüttler 1994) as already mentioned in subchapter 1.6.3.

Barruel argued convincingly that the Contrat social's involvement could be excluded on the basis of their condemnation of Bonneville's book about Jesuit infiltration (Barruel 1803e: 88). The lodge had held a trial in 1788, inspired by contemporary legal procedures against forbidden literature. The book had been sentenced to being burned after being castigated as "a production engendered by a perverse spirit, and a poison prepared to become a destructive scourge for Freemasonry" (Ragon 1853: 174). The Illuminati had contributed to the same infiltration theory as Bonneville, and Bode had been a particularly zealous proponent. According to his friend Schröder, a fellow Illuminatus, Bode's work in France had primarily been intended to share his beliefs about Jesuit plots (Knigge 2015: 288). If he had been successful with this particular lodge, it can probably be assumed that their reaction to Bonneville's book would have been less hostile.

Mathiez states in a later article that the Contrat social was influenced by Nicolas Bonneville (Mathiez 1916: 437), which is also highly improbable considering the lodge's condemnation of his book. It seems more likely that this statement, and the previously mentioned letter from Le Maire, were inspired by misidentifying the lodge Contrat social with the Cercle social. Le Maire mentioned propaganda printed by the lodge, which could be explained by the fact that Bonneville either owned or had access to a printing press. Its products carried the name *Imprimerie du Cercle social* on the title page, which could easily be confused with the lodge's name by someone unfamiliar. When comparing the Cercle social to other details of the allegedly revolutionary activities of the Contrat social, as will be shown below, it can be said with certainty that counterrevolutionaries mistook one group for the other.

Barruel traced the false accusations to a book called *les Masques arrachés*, written by Jacques le Sueur (Barruel 1803e: 87). Le Sueur had alleged that "the first cry of the French insurrection came from the lodge Contrat social, presided over by this *de Leutre"*[24], who was allegedly joined by a list of named individuals (Le Sueur 1791: 60-61). This statement is similar to the *Bouche de Fer's* claim that the "first ideas of the necessity of arming all citizens"[25] had come from the Cercle social. The first necessity of taking up arms could be somewhat faithfully paraphrased as the first cry of

[24] "Une anecdote que l'on ignore, c'est que le premier cri de l'insurrection française est parti de la loge du *Contrat social*, présidée par ce *de Leutre*: c'est dans cette loge que se couvait depuis longtems le projet de la révolution" (Le Sueur 1791: 60-61).

[25] "C'est encore du sein du Cercle Social que partirent les premières idées de la nécessité d'armer tous les citoyens pour empêcher les guerres civiles, la perte d'un Roi-citoyen, et de l'Assemblée auguste des envoyés du Peuple Franc." (Bdf 1790 #2: 5)

insurrection. Although not identical, the similarities between this statement and Le Sueur's claims about the Contrat social are clear.

Johann August Starck, an early proponent of the Illuminati conspiracy theory, corresponded with Barruel around the time the *Memoirs* were published. In 1797, Starck sent Barruel a report written by a group of unidentified authors. In the report, the anonymous writers stated that the Duke of Orléans — who was the Grand Master of the Grand Orient de France before the Revolution — had placed an inscription on the door of the Contrat social lodge. The inscription allegedly said that everybody was to "bring their own ray of light" there.[26] In the Memoirs, Barruel dismissed this as a "fable" (Barruel 1803d: 91). Starck later agreed with him about the lodge's innocence, and attributed the Duke of Orléans' inscription to the lodge Amis réunis (Starck 1803b: 294).

In reality, the rumoured inscription probably did not belong to any lodge. However, it can be tied to the *Cercle* social. A letter published in Christoph Martin Wieland's *Neue Teutsche Merkur* described the *Cirque* where the Friends of the Truth held their meetings. The Cirque was one of the buildings belonging to the *Palais-Royal* in Paris, which was owned by the above-mentioned Duke of Orléans. According to the *Merkur,* a decorative temple — or at least the fronton of one — had been built in the Cirque's hall, inscribed with the words "Orient universel des Francs. Apportez y chacun un rayon de lumiere!" (*Neue Teutsche Merkur* December 1790: 392). Although the wording is slightly different to the "chacun y porte son rayon de Lumière!" (Riquet 1989: 179) that Starck's report placed on the door of the Contrat social lodge, the meaning and description is similar enough to identify the Cercle social as the real source of this rumour. The pediment of the decorative temple was misunderstood as the functional outside of the Contat social's meeting place.

As the owner of the Palais-Royal and the Cirque, the Duke of Orléans was the Cercle social's landlord. It is therefore entirely unsurprising that his name came to be attached with the quote when the *Cercle* was conflated with the *Contrat*. Incidentally, the Duke of Orléans was also the Grand Master of the Grand Orient de France. The fact that a group working to spread revolution through Masonic lodges happened to rent their meeting room from the Grand Master of the GODF is odd, to say the least. Bonneville despised him to the point that his direct involvement seems improbable,[27] but it is nevertheless unsurprising that the Duke and the GODF were suspected.

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[26] "chacun y porte son rayon de Lumière!" (Riquet 1989: 179)

[27] Bonneville was particularly unimpressed by his moral character. The Bouche de Fer published advertisements for concerts and parties held at the Palais Royal, which was an infamously seedy building complex. Bonneville recommended the special offer to his subscribers, because "places where the voice of truth is heard are purified" (Bdf 1791 #5: 80). His *Tribun du Peuple* included a letter praising the duke for his patriotism, which opened with a quote in English:

> There is *hardly* a period at which *the most irregular character* may not be *redressed*. The *mistakes* of *one sex* find *a retreat* in *patriotism* (*Tribun du Peuple* 1789, lettre XV: 252).

2.1.6. Propaganda Club

Unlike the Cercle social, the existence of the lodge Contrat social was easily verified. By confusing the two, Bonneville's fictional organisation was accidentally provided with supporting evidence. More evidence, and more confusion, was provided after a French pamphlet denouncing a newly formed "Propaganda Club" was published in 1790.[28]

The allegations made in the pamphlet caused international concern. Other pamphlets followed, along with documents exposing the club's supposed work to foment revolution in other countries (Feldmann 1955). Questions were raised concerning the authenticity of these sources, but they were believable to a sufficient number to cause what Luckert describes as a "public furor" in Germany (Luckert 1993: 487-494).

The documents presented as evidence for the *Club de la Propagande* might have been created by foreign counterrevolutionaries (Luckert: 487), but the idea behind the Propagande itself wasn't far from the real aspirations of some revolutionaries.[29] Divided into six sections with different tasks, the Propagande's activities were said to revolve around improving the group's political theory, printing ideological apologetics, corresponding with French and international sympathisers, critically examining the actions of all governments, and promoting writings believed to benefit the cause (*Dénonciation à…* 1790: 19-21).

As with the philosophe conspiracy in the first two volumes of Barruel's Memoirs — where Enlightenment writers were accused of spreading ideas critical of religion and monarchies — the Propagande fits the 18th century definition of a conspiracy, but it has little in common with the images that come to mind when hearing the contemporary term "conspiracy theory". Producing texts about current events and then spreading them as part of a coordinated effort to change public opinion is normal in any democracy, but can certainly be threatening to the opponents of the group behind those writings. Revolutionary ideas inspired genuine fears of mass violence in many, and covertly

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[28] *Dénonciation à toutes les puissances de l'Europe d'un plan de conjuration contre sa tranquillité générale par une association formée à Paris sous le nom de club de la propagande* (1790).

[29] A letter sent from Frankfurt to the *Moniteur universel* (28 October 1790: 989) reported that the pamphlet was being spread to denounce the Club of 1789 as the masterminds of a plan to spread the principles of the French constitution. The author sarcastically writes that the enemies of humanity responsible for the pamphlet deserve to be thanked by the club. On 18 February 1790 the revolutionary *Annales patriotiques* reported that a "société *de la Propagande de la liberté*" was being created in Paris to publish and translate content for European audiences. Any monarch who might wish to stop knowledge of natural law from reaching his land was advised to build a very high wall. This publication predated the pamphlet (dated 12 June 1790) denouncing the Propagande to European powers, as did Nicolas de Bonneville's early plans for the Cercle social, a society that bears a strong resemblance to the Propagande (Lacroix 1898: 565-571).

spreading them would understandably worry those who saw civil war and massacres as the inevitable result.

Regardless of the real history behind the *Club de la Propagande,* its undeniable that revolutionaries used similar strategies. Historian Klaus Epstein writes that German sympathy for the French Revolution "was not a completely spontaneous phenomenon: it was carefully fostered by a stream of deliberate revolutionary propaganda" (Epstein 1975: 438-439), although he concludes that the actual effect of foreign influence is impossible to assess accurately.

The Friends of the Truth and the Cercle social's printing press were part of this "stream" of propaganda. Luckert notes that the *Bouche de fer* was distributed in parts of Germany, and that this journal was created by a Parisian group attempting to establish an international network of revolutionary societies. Unsurprisingly, the Cercle social and the Club de la Propagande were soon believed to be connected. Luckert writes that the counterrevolutionary author of the *Politisches Journal* accused the Cercle social "[t]o further extend the parameters of the 'conspiracy,'" (Luckert: 493), but the Cercle was similar enough to the Propagande to explain these claims without implying any dishonesty or malevolence. Identifying the two was especially understandable considering that Bonneville used the word Propaganda to describe the Friends of the Truth and its international correspondents (*Chronique du mois* November 1792: 84-85).

The Jacobin club was accused of operating the Propagande, probably because it was the most noteworthy revolutionary society, despite having nothing to do with it. The above-mentioned letter to the *Neue Teutsche Merkur* (December 1790: 397) called the claim laughable and untrue. As for the Bouche de fer, *denying* the explicitly stated goal of international revolutionary subversion would be laughable. Although the Cercle social was a different group entirely, and most likely fictional, it was interpreted as evidence that incorrect rumours about Jacobins were true (Politisches Journal 1791: 589-590).

Understandably, firmly rejecting false accusations despite clear evidence that *something* was happening could easily be misinterpeted as complicity. As fears of subversion led to the closure of Masonic lodges in Austria, a certain Ludwig Adolf Christian von Grolmann published a speech denouncing the conspirators who had made this measure necessary. Grolmann, himself a former member of the Illuminati, couldn't understand why so many Germans denied that the Propaganda existed, despite witnesses affirming its existence. Because widespread refusal to accept reality made it harder to resist the threat, Grolmann believed that the Propaganda itself was to blame for the confusion. He reasoned that destroying the credibility of denunciations allowed them to carry out their plans in secret (Grolmann 1794: 37-38).

According to Luckert, “several major flaws” in the story made the public lose interest after 1791. The pamphlet was suspected to be a forgery, and the group allegedly behind it couldn’t be found anywhere. Regarding the efforts of the Politisches Journal to uncover revolutionary subversion, he writes that attempts to validate the “rather vague” pamphlet proving the existence of the Propagande were “haphazard , added one claim to another” and required “readers to make constant leaps in faith” (Luckert: 494).

Efforts to counter the threat were significantly weakened by early confusion regarding the Propaganda, Cercle social and Jacobin club. The Propaganda was probably a hoax that the Jacobin club had nothing to do with, but the Friends of the Truth/Cercle social did what the Propaganda was accused of. Jacobin involvement was forcefully and rightfully denied, but the conspiracy itself was undeniable. The combination of these two circumstances triggered a desperate search for any evidence that could prove the involvement of these groups despite their denials.

Misidentification, followed by both categorical denials and seemingly unambiguous evidence, helped to turn the activism of the Friends of the Truth into a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theorists are understood to be unreasonable and paranoid, and false statements supported by dubious evidence will make anyone appear unreasonable and paranoid. Clear signs of ongoing subversion motivated continuous searches for proof, but mistakes made by investigators stopped them from finding credible evidence. They accused the wrong people, who rejected the accusation. These denials were interpreted as a cover-up. Despite conspiring in broad daylight, as Bonneville put it,[30] the Cercle social appeared as if it were hiding.

2.1.7. Explaining Universal Success With Universal Plots

Barruel’s last volume contains a rapid-fire summary of strange events that occurred internationally during and after the Revolution (1803e: 183-276). Rebellions, plots, and murder seemed to work for the benefit of the Revolution all over the map. Barruel took this as evidence of an international threat, and he was far from alone. I will argue that the conspiracy theory of the Revolution was made more plausible by an almost impossibly convenient chain of events, which included the murder of King Gustav III of Sweden in 1792. As Andreas Önnerfors writes, Gustav’s death “provided an important jigsaw piece in the big narrative of conspiracy that surrounded the French revolution as a massive game changing threat and challenge to the existing order of different ‘anciens régimes’ across Europe” (Önnerfors 2021: 135).

[30] “Je sens que “je ne puis être libre, tant qu’il existera un seul esclave sur la terre”. La machine est toute prête à être mise en œuvre. Quand on veut le bien, vouLOIR [sic] EST TOUT. Conspirez *en plein jour*, et méprisez les tyrans. Voilà tout le *mystère* du GRADE CONSTITUTIONNEL“ (Bdf 1790 #4: 37).

The conspirators were dissatisfied aristocrats without any ties to the Illuminati, and the murder plot was motivated primarily by conflicts related to Swedish politics. However, the following subchapter will argue that contemporary conspiracy theorists rejected the official story for reasons that appeared valid from their perspective. A series of mistakes, all of them quite understandable on their own, could then have led contemporaries down the garden path one step at a time.

Gustav's death weakened the counterrevolutionary coalition against France when a declaration of war appeared imminent. The second subchapter will show that both sides assumed that he was killed for the benefit of the French Revolution. Counterrevolutionaries believed that revolutionaries were behind the murder plot. Revolutionaries instead welcomed the unexpected news of his death as providential in every sense of the word, and saw it as evidence that God was on their side. Their agreement on this point indicates that the conspiracy theory was inspired by the event and its effects, and not by any factors unique to counterrevolutionary conspiracy theorists.

To counterrevolutionaries with pre-existing fears of international subversion, the timely murder appeared to be the result of — and therefore also evidence of — a Jacobin conspiracy. The final subchapter will discuss various factors that caused the conspiracy theory about Jacobins to become a conspiracy theory about Freemasons and the Illuminati.

2.1.7.1. Rejecting the Official Explanation

In his account of the origin and causes of the conspiracy theory, Önnerfors emphasises the differences between the conspiracy theory and verifiable facts, writing that "[a]lthough all trivial and spectacular facts of the crime were known to the European reading public, it was consciously labelled with the counter-factual attractiveness of the conspiracy theory" (Önnerfors 2021: 149). The actual causes of the murder have been clear since the beginning; the perpetrators belonged to the aristocratic opposition, whose long conflict with the king was well known. Despite the obvious answer, other motives have been suggested. Some accused Gustav's brother, Duke Charles of Sudermania. Based on an early version of the theory, published in 1795 by Cadet de Gassicourt, Önnerfors concludes that the conspiracy theory was created because of the Duke's lenience towards suspected conspirators and his well-known involvement with Freemasonry (Önnerfors 2021: 149).

As regent after the murder, Charles fought Swedish aristocrats and failed to fight the French Revolution. With insight into Swedish 18th century politics, the Duke's conflicts with the nobility shows that he shared his brother's political agenda. To foreign observers without the necessary context, the actions of both aristocratic plotters and the regency government were incomprehensible. A French observer unaware of these conflicts would understandably assume that Swedish nobles had a similarly friendly relationship to the monarchy as their French counterparts. Duke Charles himself

made the opposite error in 1789, blaming French nobles for the Revolution (Anderberg 2005: 322). He assumed that pre-revolutionary French politics was a fight between the nobility and an alliance between the king and the commoners, like in Sweden. From his perspective the Revolution looked like a plot to benefit the nobility by limiting the king's power.

Cadet de Gassicourt took Charles' opposition to the nobles as evidence of Jacobinism (Önnerfors 2021: 144), making the same mistake in the other direction. Cadet de Gassicourt's ignorance on this point also explains why he did not accept the official explanation for the murder plot. Önnerfors describes the motive as "crystal clear" (149), but this judgement is based on knowledge that Cadet de Gassicourt obviously lacked. Frenchmen who did not know about Gustav's conflict with the nobility wouldn't understand why noblemen would conspire to murder a king, but could easily see why Jacobins would.

2.1.7.2. Cui Bono?

To French contemporaries, the murder was of particular interest because of Gustav's role in the early stages of what was to become the War of the First Coalition. As Maximilien Robespierre put it, Gustav had planned to be a "modern Agamemnon" leading a coalition of kings against France (Robespierre 1840: 464). His death was such a boon to the Revolution that both sides rejected the "coincidence theory". Revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries alike assumed that he had been killed specifically to help the revolutionaries.

The *Gazette de Paris* (4 February 1792) reported that European monarchs — Leopold, Gustav, Frederick, Catherine II and Charles III — would come to the aid of Louis XVI. A month later Emperor Leopold died suddenly, only 44 years old. Days later, the *Courrier extraordinaire* (12 March 1792) complained that the Jacobins were constantly accused of killing him, which isn't surprising. This single death was convenient enough — "Leopold doesn't die too soon nor too late, but he dies precisely on time....!" — for some revolutionaries to take it as evidence of divine favour; "heaven itself" had taken up arms in their defense.[31] Fifteen days after Leopold died, Gustav was shot. His death removed him and Catherine from the Gazette's list, and disrupted the plans of those who remained. Russia had agreed to join the war as Sweden's ally, and under the regency Sweden was suddenly neutral.

[31] "Admirons la profondeur des décrets de la providence, admirons, ô François, comme dans sa bienfaisante sagesse, elle arrête les ennemis d'une nation trop généreuse, au milieu de leurs complots ténébreux et de leurs projets liberticides. N'en doutes pas, peuple François, le ciel même s'arme pour ta défense. Léopold ne meurt ni trop tôt ni trop tard, mais il meurt précisément à tems....!" (*Journal général de l'Europe* 15 March 1792: 228).

A Viennese sympathiser was so struck by this sequence of events that he wrote to the revolutionary *Thermomètre du jour* and declared that Catherine II could never recover from the lethargy she reportedly suffered from; the Empress had been "struck by lightning" like Gustav and Leopold, and the same fate would befall "all those who would want to attack the liberty of France: Providence watches over her: all the despots in the world would unite in vain to destroy her" (*Thermomètre du jour* 11 May 1792: 322-323). Another revolutionary newspaper, *L'Ami des loi*s (29 December 1796), named *nine* monarchs who may have been killed by God for threatening the Revolution. With or without an international conspiracy theory to explain it, it was apparently difficult to imagine that the dramatic impact of Gustav's death on the counterrevolutionary war effort wasn't the reason he died.

Based on Cadet de Gassicourt's rejection of traditional Christianity, Önnerfors argues that his conspiracy theory filled a niche that religious explanations would have occupied before the rise of religious skepticism. According to Türkay Salim Nefes and Alejandro Romero-Reche (2020: 101), the idea that secularisation causes conspiracism in general dates to the beginning of scholarly interest in conspiracy theory. Asbjørn Dyrendal (2020: 373) rejects the theory, pointing out that religion hasn't been shown to decrease belief in conspiracy theories.

The varying reactions to the assassination plot are difficult to explain by attributing the conspiracy theory to secularism making people reluctant to assume divine intervention. The murder plot was too obvious for anyone to deny, but many revolutionaries still believed God had done it. While attributing Gustav's death to direct divine intervention was more common among revolutionaries, there is no reason to think that they were less influenced by the Enlightenment than the other side. The difference appears to have been caused by how observers judged the event, rather than their levels of religiosity.

2.1.7.3. Blaming the Freemasons

The murder of Gustav III appeared to validate existing fears of a Jacobin-led Propaganda Club secretly revolutionizing Europe. Rumours about this group, and Bonneville's role in making them more plausible, are the subject of subchapter 2.1.6. Considering that the Propaganda was said to spread Jacobinism through Masonic lodges, the circumstances of Gustav's death looked remarkably suspicious.

As mentioned above, Duke Charles' actions as regent were fairly easy to misinterpret as evidence of guilt. He neglected to prosecute accomplices to his brother's murder and abandoned Gustav's plans for war against France, which was unsurprisingly interpreted as evidence of both complicity and Jacobin sympathies. Duke Charles was also the Grand Master of the Swedish Order

of Freemasons, which was unsurprisingly dragged into the accusations against him. Neither the Freemasons nor the Jacobins were actually responsible, but early versions of the conspiracy theory of the French Revolution nevertheless seemed to be confirmed by Gustav's death.

Having identified the assassins as Swedish Freemasons, identifying them as members of the Illuminati could have been as easy as misinterpreting a notoriously ambiguous label. As mentioned in subchapter 2.1.4.2, about the abbé Fauchet's possible ties to the Illuminati, the word "illuminé" was applied to many different groups at the time. Johann Joachim Christoph Bode remarked on the ambiguity of this term in his translation of Bonneville's book. In the French original, Bonneville had claimed that the Jesuits were behind the "société illuminée". Bode added a footnote explaining that there were four different and unrelated groups from Spain, France, the North and Germany who were all called "illuminés". The German illuminés were the Order of the Illuminati, while the illuminés from the North were identified as the *chapitre illuminé* from Gent (Ghent) (Bonneville 1788b: 23). Assuming that "Gent" is a typo and that Bode meant "Genf" (Geneva), where the Swedish Rite is said to have originated, the northern illuminés were apparently lodges that practiced the final degrees of the Swedish Rite. This means that according to Bode, the degree system used by the Swedish Order of Freemasons and the Illuminati were spoken of using the same French name in the 1780s.

Bode clarified that these illuminés had nothing in common except the name, and that the Northern and German illuminés were the most dissimilar of all the illuminés, but a shared name could have been more than enough to muddy the waters. If the appellation was widespread — or if the name "chapitre illuminé" caused confusion on its own — it was probably inevitable that someone would eventually misidentify the Swedish Order of Freemasons as a branch of the Illuminati. Combined with the factual errors discussed previously in this chapter, this would naturally lead to the conclusion that the Illuminati murdered Gustav III. Such a statement might appear blatantly silly in isolation, but the road there would not necessarily require accepting any unreasonable propositions.

2.1.8. Barruel's German Sources

The Illuminati complot thesis was originally formulated and spread by German writers (Oberhauser 2020). Even one of the first French versions of the conspiracy theory, an anonymous pamphlet titled *La loge rouge dévoilée* printed in 1790, contains some indications of a Prussian origin.[32]

[32] The text's focus on the Strict Observance and the Eclectic Union would fit better into a German context than a French one. While the *Stricte observance templière* did exist in France, it – and the controversies surrounding it – played a greater role in German Freemasonry than in France. The Eclectic Union was an association of German lodges. Further, the author writes that conspiratorial "Circles" could send "travellers" from Paris who would be welcomed in Berlin, Warsaw or Wrocław, three cities in Prussian territory. These details point to a writer primarily interested in German Freemasonry and threats to the safety of Prussia.

Considering that the Illuminati was based in Germany, it seems obvious that the geographical distribution of conspiracy theorists was not random.

This subchapter will discuss the role of local circumstances in the creation of the conspiracy theory. I will argue that Bonneville's writings could have had a larger audience in Germany than elsewhere. His revolutionary propaganda could have been a direct influence, considering that it included a version of the conspiracy theory. If Bonneville's recruitment efforts were successful, his actual conspiracy could also have inspired some understandable paranoia. This could explain why the effort to uncover evidence of a past conspiracy to bring about the French Revolution was based in Germany. The final subchapter of this section will argue that methods used by the Illuminati contributed to their inclusion in the conspiracy theory because of the distrust and paranoia those methods inspired.

2.1.8.1. Why Was a Conspiracy Theory of the Revolution Widespread in Germany?

Bonneville claimed to have correspondents and readers all over the world. In 1792, the *Chronique du mois,* another journal from the Cercle social's printing press, mentioned growing support for insurrection in "Italy, and above all in germany" [sic] (*Chronique du mois* May 1792: 93). While Bonneville is an extremely unreliable source, this subchapter will argue that there is some circumstantial evidence to support his claims with regards to Germany.

The same issue of the *Chronique du mois* reported that Bonneville's motion for the creation of a national guard had been printed in French and German, but that circulation was still limited to Masonic lodges. The motion, translated by Bonneville himself, was reproduced in an appendix.[33] It opens with a direct appeal to the citizens who are to form the national guard. As was pointed out by a reviewer for the *Berlinische Monatsschrift,* the French word for "citizens" was translated as "Franks" (*Berlinische Monatsschrift* June 1793: 587). The reviewer apparently assumed that this was a translation error. Considering Bonneville's other writings, however, the use of "Franken" must have been an intentional nod to Bonneville's particular ideas about nationality and identity. These have been mentioned already, in subchapter 2.1.4 on Bonneville's possible membership in the Illuminati.

Calling Frenchmen "Franks", to Bonneville, meant identifying the people of France as only one part of a greater people. The literary journal *Mercure de France* had written an article criticising the *Bouche de fer*'s incomprehensible use of language, which included repeated and unexplained

[33] "En Italie, et sur-tout en allemagne,[sic] *circulent* peu-à- peu ces murmures prolongés qui, sans cesse, grossissent et nous annoncent de nouvelles insurrections contre la tyrannie féodale et sacerdotale. […] On a fait imprimer, en françois et en allemand, la motion de N. Bonneville, pour *la garde bourgeoise* (tirée du procès verbal des électeurs de Paris, 25 juin 1789, tome III , page 146); mais elle ne circule encore que dans les □ [lodge]" (*Chronique du mois* May 1792: 93).

references to Franks. In his predictably mysterious reply, Bonneville wrote that "Frankish" does not mean "French", but that "French" means "Frankish" (*Mercure de France* 25 December 1790: 151). Translating "citoyens" as "Franken" makes it apparent that the motion was addressed to a Frankish people that Bonneville considered Frenchmen to be only one part of.

Bonneville's idea of Frankishness could explain a particularly odd feature of German public discourse in the 1790s. After the Revolution, German sympathisers began using the word *Franken,* instead of *Franzosen,* to refer to the people of France. Considering both the timing and political tendency, I suspect that this was because of Bonneville's influence. However, other explanations for this development have been suggested. Joachim Herrgen's explanation is that German Jacobins felt that the Revolution's effect on French society should be reflected in the use of a new demonym (Herrgen 2000: 232). Jörg Echternkamp instead argues that the change in terminology was caused by a troubling combination of revolutionary fervour and anti-French sentiment. An ideologically motivated orientation towards revolutionary France was difficult to reconcile with pre-revolutionary nationalism (Echternkamp 1998: 144-146). According to Echternkamp, the result was cognitive dissonance that had to be resolved. The historical Franks that settled in Gaul and gave France its modern name had been a Germanic people, and turning Frenchmen into Franks was the next best thing to making them Germans (Echternkamp: 537). Herrgen instead interprets this reference to a shared historical identity as expressing hope for a future (re-)unification (Herrgen: 232-233).

This change probably occurred after Bonneville's texts were being distributed in Germany, and it is therefore possible that he inspired this new vocabulary. I would argue that this is especially probable considering the awkwardness of using "Franken" to refer to the French people when this was already the German demonym for the population of Franconia. Later, the French were referred to as *Westfranken* or *Neufranken*, while *Ostfranken* used for inhabitants of Franconia. This development would be easier to understand as a necessary local adjustment to a foreign idea, compared to the alternative scenario where German speakers spontaneously chose such confusing terminology.

It seems that this was a uniquely German development, whereas Bonneville's Frankishness was intended to be much broader. This could have been the result of the factors named by Echternkamp and Herrgen, even if Bonneville was the original source. Another possibility is that Bonneville had more of an audience in Germany. Considering the content of his writings, this could have been part of the reason why Germany was a hotbed of conspiracy theories.

Steven Luckert argues that the German writers who pioneered the conspiracy theory primarily wanted to uncover threats from within Germany, rather than explain the French Revolution (Luckert: 13-14). Bonneville could have contributed to both. Not only did Bonneville actively work to spread

something remarkably similar to the Illuminati complot thesis, but his propagation of revolutionary ideology could also have contributed. If he was more successful in Germany, it would be reasonable if efforts to counteract ongoing subversion were particularly intense as a result.

That countermeasures against the Cercle social would take the form of conspiracy theories about the Illuminati could be partly explained by his target audience. According to Klaus Epstein, revolutionary propagandists "were naturally most numerous in those institutions which had already spread *Aufklärung* principles before 1789, especially reading clubs and Masonic lodges" (Epstein 1975: 439). Even if Bonneville's possible role is disregarded, some conspiratorial conclusions could easily have been drawn from the observation that revolutionary sympathisers and members of the Illuminati were recruited from the same spaces.

Considering the Illuminati's particular history with radicalism and persecution, it does not seem unreasonable to suspect that former members would be more likely to support the Revolution. If Bonneville really did have a more sizeable audience in Germany, this could be part of the reason why. He appears to have counted on something similar. Based on the conclusions drawn from the abbé Fauchet's speech in subchapter 2.1.4.2., it seems clear that Bonneville had hoped to recruit former members of the Illuminati. This could also explain his misleading statements implying that the Cercle social was connected to the Illuminati, like those discussed in subchapter 2.1.4. Perhaps he hoped to win support for his own project by attaching it to the memory of the Illuminati.

Although the extent of Bonneville's own influence as a revolutionary propagandist will probably remain unclear, it can be concluded that revolutionary propaganda is one part of the explanation for the origins of the Illuminati complot thesis. Early proponents of the conspiracy theory intended to use it to counteract the threat posed by local revolutionary sympathisers. In the following subchapter, I will argue that the defunct Order of the Illuminati became central to the conspiracy narrative because of methods used by leaders of the order.

2.1.8.2. Why Was the Conspiracy Theory About the Illuminati?

Historian Timothy Tackett's hypothesis about conspiracy theories from the radical left in the 1790s gives two factors particular importance. Real conspiracies were a political threat, and a collective identity crisis caused by the Revolution triggered an overreaction to this threat. He concluded that other revolutions would have to be studied in order to test the hypothesis (Tackett 2000: 713). This subchapter will argue that the real conspiracies were probably enough to trigger conspiracy theories. Even though the conspiracy theories were far from the reality, the actual extent of a conspirary is inherently difficult to know. Oversensitivity to signs of further conspiracies could be an understandable reaction to the situation itself, even if the resulting conspiracy theory is irrational.

Unlike the revolutionaries in France, the early promoters of the Illuminati conspiracy theory in Germany had not undergone the kind of societal upheaval that Tackett describes. This difference makes it difficult to consider Tackett's conclusions regarding Jacobin conspiracy theories to be accurate for their counterrevolutionary German counterparts, who did not have the same need to question their old loyalties and values. Someone like Johann August Starck (1741-1816), a Lutheran theologian and early antagonist of the Illuminati, could oppose the French Revolution without questioning the religiously and politically conservative views he espoused before 1789. Considering the methods used by the Illuminati, which will be discussed below, it would be fair to say that both groups did experience real conspiracies that they overreacted to.

During the peak of its activity, the Illuminati was involved with Masonic lodges without publicly announcing their presence. In a letter to a prospective member who wanted to add the Illuminati degrees to his own lodge, Illuminatus Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth explained that this wasn't how the order did things. For the lodge, joining the Illuminati would only mean that Minervals could be sent to receive the Masonic degrees there, and that the lodge would be regarded as a plant nursery to recruit members from. Lodges with unofficial ties to the Illuminati were also members of the Eclectic Union, "under the indirect protection" of the order, which Ditfurth had co-founded (Markner et al. 2013: 433-434).

The Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross had begun searching for hidden members of the Illuminati long before the official end of the Illuminati. According to Christopher McIntosh this Rosicrucian group had accessed private letters encouraging the recipient, a Lutheran theologian, to spread Deism and Socinianism (McIntosh 2011: 107-108). Deism and Socinianism, although different, rejected fundamental aspects of orthodox Christianity, like the divinity of Christ. Leaders of the order sounded the alarm in March 1783. Their decree, translated by McIntosh, ordered that "the said sect is to be made known to all directors of the Order through secret Order-circulars, and all brothers are to be warned by their directors and emphatically instructed to keep their eyes open for the members of this un-Christian and therefore un-masonic sect" and instructed members to offer energetic resistance (McIntosh: 108).

Like the search for a Propaganda club, the instructions sent out by the leaders of the Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross were inspired by the presence of a hidden enemy. Ideological and religious differences explain the desire to work against the Illuminati, and the methods used by the Illuminati made vigilance necessary. These Rosicrucian Freemasons were told to be on the qui vive, and they appear to have remained in this state of mind.

On a more personal level, some of the protagonists of the Illuminati complot thesis in Germany had particular reasons for paying attention to the activities of the Illuminati. Many of them were

former members and/or former enemies (Luckert 1993). Johann August von Starck was among the latter, while Ludwig Adolf Christian von Grolman was an ex-Illuminatus. Letters between members of the order show that during his time as an active member, Grolman had repeatedly asked for Starck to be recruited into the order. His requests resulted in a correspondence between Starck and Ditfurth. Without openly identifying themselves as members of the Illuminati, Grolman and Ditfurth tried to convince Starck to join the para-Illuminati Eclectic Union founded by Ditfurth (Markner et al. 2013).

Starck and Grolman had a personal history with the Illuminati, and they both spread conspiracy theories about the Illuminati causing the French Revolution. As Steven Luckert shows, they had this in common with most of the collaborators of the highly conspiracist *Eudämonia* journal. Starck had been a target of accusations during the Crypto-Catholicism controversy, and Grolman had gotten involved as his defender. Luckert argues that it seems probable that some early contributors to the Illuminati complot thesis "were motivated by a desire for revenge and used the perfect opportunity offered by the outbreak of the French Revolution to accuse their old enemies of fomenting rebellion" (1993: 574-575).

While their personal histories do provide a possible motive for intentionally exaggerating their suspicions against the Illuminati, I think that Starck and Grolman's experiences could have been enough to cause such an extreme reaction to the perceived threat. Ulterior motives are certainly possible, but they could also have overreacted in good faith. I would argue that the deceptive tactics used by the Illuminati could have left as much of a mark as their personal attacks. Luckert writes that Grolman had joined the Illuminati from a Masonic context, and he had appreciated Freemasonry as a charitable institution that protected both the state and Christianity (Luckert: 580). This detail alone could explain quite a lot about his later reactions. As mentioned in the background chapter 1.3.4 on the deceptive practices used within the Order of the Illuminati, Knigge had written a letter threatening to reveal Weishaupt's real beliefs to members who cherished their religion. Knigge was one of the most important leaders, and had been responsible for recruiting many of the order's members. According to the letter, some of them apparently feared that the Illuminati had secret plans to undermine belief in Christianity by propagating Deism. Not only had Knigge lied to those members by denying that the leaders of the order had such intentions, but he had tricked them into working for the order (Markner et al. 2013: 536). For members who joined the order under false pretenses, like Grolman, hostility to the order would obviously be an understandable reaction to learning the truth.

According to Luckert, Grolman later claimed that he left the order after overhearing a conversation and becoming "convinced of the Illuminati's bad intentions, such as their attacks upon Christianity as well as their political methods" (Luckert: 581). In a letter to Grolman, Starck

expressed concern with regards to the structure of the Eclectic Union. The rules allowed members to seek out higher degrees in other lodges, and Starck worried about the possibility of members joining the Rosicrucians or Illuminati (Markner et al. 2013: 518). Facilitating recruitment to the Illuminati was of course the actual goal of Starck's would-be recruiters, who hoped to use his connections to recruit or influence others (Markner et al. 2013: 308).

Although there are some definitions of "conspiracy theory" that don't involve factual error or irrationality, as was mentioned in the theoretical discussion, the term has undeniable connotations of paranoia and unfounded suspicions. I would argue that Starck's experience with secret Illuminati recruiters is enough to make his continued discomfort understandable. Starck had himself been in contact with Illuminati recruiters without realising it. For both him and Grolman, their ideological and religious disagreements with the Illuminati would probably have made the experience even more disconcerting. Remaining suspicious despite a lack of evidence for their presence wasn't unreasonable, since their activity wasn't easy to detect the first time around.

Although the following chapter is dedicated to Barruel's conspiracy theory, most of the answer to the question of why Barruel believed it will be answered by the conclusions drawn from Bonneville's conspiracy. Combined with Bonneville's activities, I would argue that the history of the Illuminati explains enough about the resulting conspiracy theory to make its inception and survival unsurprising. Barruel relied heavily on German sources – like Grolman and Starck (Barruel 1803c: 185) – and explaining the causes of their belief also clarifies why Barruel believed in theories propagated by them.[34] Rather than present an explanation specifically for Barruel's conspiracy theory, the next chapter will support these earlier conclusions by arguing against some alternative explanations. I will also argue that despite appearances to the contrary, some aspects of Barruel's conspiracy theory don't require much of an explanation at all.

[34] Claus Oberhauser attributes the conspiracy theories found in the later volumes of Barruel's *Memoirs* to information sent to him by Starck. Since their correspondence began after the publication of volumes 1 and 2, that would mean that the Illuminati was a later addition to a conspiracy theory that Barruel had already formulated against other groups (Oberhauser 2020: 557). I would argue that the lack of information about the Illuminati in the first two volumes had more to do with Barruel's intended disposition than with new information provided by Starck's letters. Already in the preface of volume 1, Barruel divided the conspiracy into three parts. The first two – the first against Christianity and the second against the monarchy – are taken up by volumes 1 and 2, respectively. Since the third part of the conspiracy is the Illuminati, it seems likely that Barruel always intended for the Illuminati to be the focus of volume 3.

2.2. Barruel's Conspiracy Theory

This chapter will discuss some aspects of Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. The first subchapters revolve around the question of what Barruel actually meant when he declared that the French Revolution had been planned. Based on a reading informed by the methodological choice to prefer interpretations that maximise agreement, I will argue that Barruel's assertions can be understood as much less dramatic than commonly assumed. Rather than claim that conspirators carefully staged a detailed series of events, Barruel's conspiracy theory mostly alleges that conspirators caused the Revolution by spreading revolutionary ideology.

One subchapter will discuss Masonic higher degrees and their importance to Barruel's theory. I will argue that the definition of the term "conspiracy theory" makes it harder to explain why people believe in conspiracy theories, since a more widely believed theory is less likely to be studied as an example of a conspiracy theory by researchers.

This chapter will also support the conclusions of the previous chapter, by arguing against two alternative explanations for the origins of the conspiracy theory of the French Revolution. The first is the claim that Barruel was driven by an inability to criticise the ancien régime, and the final subchapter will argue against characterising this version of the conspiracy theory as a continuation of earlier anti-Protestant propaganda.

2.2.1. The Philosophe Conspiracy

Barruel's stranger ideas, like his use of passwords and symbols to prove that Freemasons are spiritual heirs to Manichaeism, are eye-catching. This type of reasoning does occupy a large part of the *Memoirs*, but not all of his alleged conspiracies are equally improbable. The first volumes denounce Enlightenment philosophes and their attempts to undermine Christianity and the Monarchy. Their correspondence explicitly discussed efforts to spread forbidden ideas while avoiding punishment. To avoid censorship — or worse — Voltaire, d'Alembert and others worked discreetly, providing plausible deniability for subversive messages. Finding the subtext requires some "decoding", which gives even the accurate conclusions found in this volume an oddly paranoid tone, but the conspiracy theory itself isn't much more exotic than any other illegal attempt to shape public opinion to the detriment of the status quo. Using the 18th-century definition of a conspiracy, these writers were actually conspirators if they worked together to illegally subvert the current system of government.

Of course, there are also aspects Barruel's theory that don't appear to have been caused by the factual basis alone. The following subchapters will discuss Barruel's own summary of his thesis,

which sounds like the very definition of an irrationally paranoid conspiracy theory. First, I will argue that Barruel's statement that everything happened because of a conspiracy is better understood as a moral judgement; when a people chooses to rebel based on seditious propaganda, whoever planned to corrupt them ideologically also planned the rebellion. Secondly, I will argue that Barruel's stated reasons for publicising that a conspiracy caused the French Revolution also led him to emphasise the conspiratorial aspects of his theory.

2.2.1.1. No Coincidences

Although the all-encompassing conspiracy theory is rare (Räikkä & Ritola 2020: 60), Barruel seems to have expressed exactly this belief. In what might be his most quoted statement, which appears to summarise both his own theories and the conspiratorial mindset so perfectly, he declared that

> everything down to the most horrifying crimes, all was foreseen, planned, arranged, resolved, agreed upon: everything was the effect of the deepest villainy, because everything was prepared, brought about by the men who alone held the threads of conspiracies woven long ago in secret societies, and who knew how to choose and hasten moments favourable to their plots.[35]

Julien Giry calls this passage "the fundamental axiom of the conspiracist myth" (Giry 2015: 31). The quote does sound like a perfect example of the basic assumptions described by Michael Barkun as central to conspiracy theories in general. Nothing happened by coincidence, and events that appeared to be coincidences were in reality part of the conspiracy. This belief is, of course, inherently implausible. It's so implausible that the interpretation should be re-examined before assuming that Barruel's theory of the French Revolution was this outlandish.

As was discussed in the methodology chapter, a charitable interpretation maximises agreement between the reader and the text. If an ambiguous passage has multiple possible meanings, the more factually accurate and/or rational alternative will be preferred. As Donald Davidson writes, a significant amount of agreement is necessary for a meaningful discussion of disagreement. Rather than hide disagreement, an interpretation that maximises agreement highlights the disagreement by providing necessary contrast: "To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about" (Davidson 1991: 153). The methodological choice to reinterpret a bizarre statement, and to favour a less bizarre alternative if one presents itself, is also intended to make it more probable that the resulting interpretation captures the author's intended meaning. According to Willard Van Orman Quine, a sufficiently

[35] "Dans cette Révolution Françoise, tout jusqu'à ses forfaits les plus épouvantables, tout a été prévu, médité, combiné, résolu, statué: tout a été l'effet de la plus profonde scélératesse puisque tout a été préparé, amené par des hommes qui avoient seuls le fil des conspirations long-temps ourdies dans des sociétés secrètes, et qui ont su choisir et hâter les momens propices aux complots" (Barruel 1803a: ix-x).

erroneous statement is more likely to be the result of a misunderstanding or mistranslation (Quine 2013: 54).

These methodological considerations would require re-examining blatantly irrational statements before drawing any conclusions about what Barruel believed. A belief that literally *everything* that happened was somehow part of one big plot is obviously unfounded. Despite being so explicitly stated, I will argue that this wasn't Barruel's actual meaning. The quote is an attention-grabbing summary of a larger text. By using the hermeneutic circle, the rest of Barruel's *Memoirs* can be used to clarify what was actually being summarised in the preface.

We don't even have to leave the preface to find evidence in support of a more nuanced interpretation. Despite writing that *everything* was planned, Barruel conceded that some events were probably unplanned (1803a: x). This isn't as contradictory as it might seem. When Barruel wrote that "everything" was planned, he emphasised "the most horrifying crimes" rather than the most random events, or the most unconnected coincidences. The point wasn't that nothing was random or unexpected, but that conspirators took advantage of coincidences to do what they wanted. Unforeseen events can be used to carry out a plan, making them occasions rather than causes.

An even less literal interpretation is supported by Barruel's reaction to reports that the abbé Raynal (1713-1796), one of the Enlightenment philosophes he blamed for inciting rebellion, had scolded the revolutionary National Assembly for acting against the principles of the Enlightenment. Raynal clearly didn't plan or desire what he protested against, but Barruel took his protest as evidence that Raynal and other philosophes conspired to bring about *a* revolution. It is, after all, "in their name that Raynal dares to say to the new French legislators: This isn't what we wanted; you have stepped away from the path we traced towards Revolution. […] ".[36] After quoting a younger Raynal as saying that any people obedient to its king is cowardly and stupid for whimpering when it should roar, Barruel asked rhetorically: "When these peoples finally begin to *roar*, what are you complaining about?" (Barruel 1803b: 122). The abbé Raynal had conspired to spread incendiary writings against the monarchy, and Barruel reasoned that whatever rebellion happened as a result of that original conspiracy can be attributed to it. Everything, even Raynal's shame, proved who was at fault.[37]

Barruel didn't question Raynal's honest rejection of the actual events of the French Revolution, nor did he suggest that Raynal had changed his mind about violence. Referring to violence that took

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[36] "C'est en leur nom que Raynal ose dire aux nouveaux législateurs François: Ce n'est pas là ce que nous voulions; vous êtes hors de la ligne que nous avions tracée à la Révolution" (Barruel 1803b: 121).

[37] "Ainsi jusqu'à ces vaines protestations de la Philosophie humiliée, et forcée à rougir des excès entraînés par ses leçons, tout concourt à démontrer l'existence et la réalité de ses conspirations" (Barruel 1803b: 123).

place before August of 1792, Barruel stated that "[w]ithout a doubt Raynal and his confrères, the first Philosophes, didn't want all of these massacres" (1803b: 122). If we use this passage to interpret the preface – where even the worst crimes were planned by the conspirators – the result appears to be either paradoxical or inconsistent. No matter how unforeseen and unwanted these massacres might have been, they were nevertheless foreseen and agreed upon. However, these passages are easily reconciled if Barruel didn't exclude undesired consequences from the "everything" that was planned.

According to Kurtis Hagen (2017), common description of conspiracism often fail to match the real contents of conspiracy theories. While conspiracy theories are often said to be implausible because of their enormous scope, and because conspirators would need superhuman abilities to carry out such a ludicrously complicated scheme, Hagen points out that conspiracies that fit this description are mostly found in literature about conspiracy theories, rather than in actual conspiracy theories. Even in Barruel's case, the cunningly engineered masterplan seems to be missing. Raynal was a conspirator because he encouraged and justified resistance to the *ancien régime*. He conspired by preaching revolution, not by writing the script for it. Despite sounding like the epitome of a conspiracy theory, Barruel's allegations don't live up to their reputation. There was a conspiracy, but there was no inscrutably cunning plot to orchestrate the events of the Revolution.

Today, writing in Barruel's style would be a serious disadvantage. The criterion of embarrassment would then lead a reader to the conclusion that someone who sounds like a conspiracy theorist probably is one. This makes it especially important to keep in mind that Barruel didn't write to an audience with a 21st century understanding of what a conspiracy theorist is, or what a conspiracy theory sounds like. He had no reason to believe that using the word "conspiracy" or blaming the Illuminati would make him less credible, and no reason to shy away from conspiratorial rhetoric. He might even have benefitted from emphasising the conspiracy aspect. In the next subchapter, I will discuss his possible motivation for doing so.

2.2.1.2. Local Circumstances Made Me Do It

A postscript to the fourth volume, where Barruel responded to attacks from the *Monthly Review,* is a defense of the conspiracy theory as such. Barruel's English critic, a journalist named Griffith, apparently found the irreligious philosophe conspiracy proven to his satisfaction, but dismissed Barruel's allegations of a conspiracy to overthrow the monarchy. As Barruel put it, Griffith believed that the end of the French monarchy should be attributed to "local circumstances, much more than to the wishes and to the plots of the leaders of the Revolution" (Barruel 1803d: vj). Barruel remarked that the Jacobins would be happy to accept Griffith's version of events, because they too

> claim to have the right to say to our Kings: If we come after your throne, blame yourselves; it was your perfidy and your despotism, much more than Brissot or Syeyes, which dethroned Louis XVI; which, much more than Péthion and Robespierre, made his head fall. Above all it was the tyranny of Louis XVI, which inspired in us the widely publicised wish to leave not a single King on earth.[38]

Barruel's reaction to Griffith's counterargument reveals a number of possible reasons for his emphasis on conspiracy as the ultimate cause of the Revolution. One reason is ideological. Barruel's response to Griffith positions the conspiracy theory as the alternative to justifying rebellion. Here, and throughout the *Memoirs*, Barruel condemned both the theory of popular sovereignty and the revolutionaries' opinion that insurrection is a legitimate response to tyranny. Arguing that circumstances made French insurrectionists act as they did — i.e. interpreting their arguments in defense of rebellion as an explanation rather than dismissing them as empty excuses — risked accidentally giving credibility to the claim that insurrection is justified under the right circumstances. Barruel didn't believe that rebellion was ever an acceptable solution to economic or political problems, nor did he accept it as the inevitable outcome of those problems.

Another reason hinted at in the same paragraph is strategic; conspiracism suited Barruel's purposes. The conspiracy theory was intended to prevent international revolution, using recent French history to warn other countries, but France's "local circumstances" are by definition irrelevant for predicting the future elsewhere. Placing all of the blame on a pre-existing "wish to leave not a single King on earth" instead reveals the full scope of the danger.

Further, nuance creates distraction. As can be seen from his response, Barruel took Griffith's reference to "local circumstances" to mean that Brissot, Robespierre and other revolutionary leaders were less culpable. Focusing on circumstances plays into the hands of the conspirators by shifting blame away from them, allowing other Jacobins to continue scheming without having the actions of their predecessors thrown in their faces.

These strategic reasons were clearly important. This was also explained in the preface to the first volume, where Barruel stated that he wrote the *Memoirs* as a warning. To help other peoples prevent

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[38] "M. Griffith me fait la grace de trouver passables, satisfaisantes même, les preuves que je donne de la *Conspiration des Sophistes contre l'Autel*; mais celles des *Sophistes contre le Trône* lui semble, nous dit-il, *si imparfaitement* démontrée, que jusqu'ici il croit de voir attribuer l'extinction de la Royauté en France à des circonstances locales, bien plus qu'aux vœux et aux complots des chefs de la Révolution. Ce qu'il y a de vrai, c'est que les Jacobins ne seroit pas fâchés que l'on s'en tînt à cette opinion; c'est que les Jacobins aussi prétendent avoir le droit de dire à nos Rois: Si nous en voulons à votre Trône, prenez vous-en à vous-mêmes, ce sont vos perfidies et votre despotisme qui, bien plus que Brissot et Syeyes, [sic] ont détrôné Louis XVI; qui, bien plus que Péthion et Robespierre, ont fait tomber sa tête. C'est sur-tout la tyrannie de Louis XVI, qui nous a inspiré le vœu si public, de ne pas laisser un seul Roi sur la terre" (Barruel 1803d: vj)

a future revolution, he believed that it was necessary to combat two errors. The first was a refusal to see any planning, and proponents of this error couldn't see the point in preventing future revolutions. Proponents of the second error claimed that only some events of the Revolution were planned. Barruel saw this error as even more dangerous than blaming everything on coincidences. It's easy to see why; if the positive sides of the Revolution were planned but all violence was circumstantial, a revolutionary conspiracy could still be morally acceptable. Revolutionary principles would remain untainted, despite the bloodshed. Some might believe that another revolution would go better (Barruel 1803a: x-xi). Disproving this second "error" meant blaming even seemingly innocuous aspects of Enlightenment philosophy for acts of violence committed during the Revolution. To justify these allegations, Barruel made much of Voltaire's famous slogan, *Écrasez l'Infâme.*[39] Voltaire used the phrase, sometimes in an abbreviated form, when urging his friends to act. Barruel understood the slogan as incitement to "crush Christianity", which is a reasonable interpretation in light of how it was used. Less reasonably, he concludes that by "crushing" Voltaire meant something like the Reign of Terror:[40] "Even for the most revolting part of this antireligious revolution, the whole difference could well be reduced to these words: some would have wanted to crush, and others crush."[41] By linking the primary spokesmen for the religious and political ideals of the Revolution to its violence, Barruel probably wanted to stop the kind of analysis that led Illuminatus Bernhard Christoph Faust to suggest that reduced alcohol consumption could prevent bloodshed next time (Knigge 2015: 235).

So far, this chapter has revolved around statements found in the first and second volumes. I have argued that the details of Barruel's allegations against the philosophes were less unrealistic than his rhetoric might imply. Stigma attached to conspiracy theories and conspiratorial rhetoric could encourage modern readers to take Barruel's rhetoric at face value instead of searching for an alternative interpretation. In the next subchapter, I will discuss the latter half of Barruel's second volume, which introduces the more notorious parts of the conspiracy theory. After the philosophe

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[39] Literally "crush the infamous!", or "the despicable". Exactly what should be crushed is left unsaid.

[40] Barruel's reaction can partly be explained by their use of dysphemisms. Ironically reversing the common tendency to sublimate violence into brotherly love, the philosophes intentionally made themselves sound worse. D'Alembert cheerfully predicted a violent death for the Jesuits when he obviously means the end of the order (Barruel 1803a: 66-67). Voltaire's suggestion to solve the Jansenist controversy by drowning both sides, or by strangling the last Jesuit with the entrails of the last Jansenist (Barruel 1803a: 123), is wildly different from the loving rhetoric used in defense of oppression by his contemporaries. It seems probable that Barruel took these statements seriously in part because the norm was to exaggerate kindness and hide aggression.

[41] "Pour la partie même la plus révoltante de cette révolution antireligieuse , toute la différence pourroit bien se réduire à ces mots : les uns auroient voulu écraser; et les autres écrasent" (Barruel 1803a: 41).

conspiracy, Barruel moved to Freemasonry. He alleged that the real secrets of Freemasonry, revealed only to those chosen to receive higher degrees, had originated with ancient heresies.

The following subchapter will discuss how Barruel's references to higher degree systems helped and hurt his credibility in different ways. As with Bonneville's conspiracy, I will argue that both of these effects were necessary for the creation of a famous conspiracy theory. Because a widely believed theory will rarely be considered a conspiracy theory, the most believable conspiracy theories are unlikely to be studied as such. Factors that inspire belief in conspiracy theories are therefore less likely to be seen as contributing to belief in conspiracy theories if their effect is strong enough.

2.2.2. Known Knowns, Unknown Unknowns and Known Unknown Superiors

Separate Masonic degree systems with different form and content had proliferated throughout the 18th century. Barruel believed that some of these — especially Rosicrucian and Templar degrees — were vectors for subversion, and he used the term "back-lodge" to refer to the Masonic groups using either these degrees or degrees from the Order of the Illuminati.[42] By placing the conspiracy entirely within higher degrees and back-lodges, Barruel excluded the degrees that all Freemasons would have experienced.

Alleging that an internal hierarchy restricted the amount of information available to members allowed him to account for Freemasons who had nothing to do with any conspiracies. Barruel noted the need for an explanation on this point, writing that "the exceptions to be made for honest Masons have been & are still so numerous, that they themselves become an inexplicable mystery to those who haven't grasped the history & principles of the sect".[43] Barruel must have predicted that people would doubt his honesty on this point, because he used more than three pages to assure readers that this was his actual belief.

Limiting the conspiracy to only some members allowed Barruel to explain the otherwise "inexplicable mystery" of innocent Freemasons surrounded by conspirators. He reasoned that honest Freemasons, good citizens, loyal subjects and faithful Christians are kept away from the back-lodge (Barruel 1803b: v). This includes anyone whose character would lend credibility to a statement that

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[42] The specific allegations will not be described in detail. Barruel's theory differed from the ones presented within Freemasonry – for example the Manichaean origin story, which was mostly based on a single text written by Enlightenment philosophe and revolutionary Condorcet (Barruel 1803b: 277) – but his methodology appears to be based on common features of real higher degrees, as discussed in the introductory background chapter on higher degree systems.

[43] "En un mot, les exceptions à faire pour les Maçons honnêtes ont été & sont encore si nombreuses, qu'elles deviennent elles-mêmes un mystère inexplicable pour ceux qui n'ont pas saisi l'histoire & les principes de la secte" (Barruel 1803b: 186).

no revolutionary conspiracies had taken place, making it possible to explain away their testimony. Consequently, Freemasonry could be implicated regardless of how many innocent members there were. By providing an explanation for credible denials, situating the conspiracy in the upper echelons of a secretive hierarchy made the conspiracy theory more difficult to falsify. If individual members denied the existence of such a hierarchy, they could be explained away as ignorant.

Similar claims have been made about groups without anything resembling Masonic degree systems, which indicates that the functionality was more important than the factual basis. In 17th and 18th century France, various stories were spread about both Jesuits and Jansenists that served to reconcile the Jesuit/Jansenist plot with innocent members of those groups. *La feuille villageoise*, a revolutionary journal, stated in a eulogy over its ex-Jesuit co-founder Joachim Cérutti that teachers and missionaries were entirely separate from the Jesuits sent into high society to scheme on the society's behalf (*La Feuille Villageoise* 23 February 1792: 506). The writer of the article clearly didn't think that Cérutti, a former teacher, was involved with any scheming. If not for the distinction between different Jesuits, the apparent conflict between Cérutti's character and allegations against his order would have been difficult to resolve.[44]

With regards to the Jansenists, the 17th century Jesuit René Rapin's account of the conflict includes a number of accusations that Jansenist leaders kept their true goals and beliefs from the public. Rapin reproduced a document said to contain secret instructions. Among other things, Jansenists were allegedly told to falsely deny their belief in the heretical doctrines on grace the Jesuits suspected them of promoting. Those trusted enough to receive a copy of these instructions were to hide them from any Jansenists who weren't firm enough in their heresy to hear the full truth (Rapin 1863: 31-39).

These two claims of internal secret-keeping allowed accusers to bypass any nuances or contradictions that could undermine accusations against a diverse group. The notion of "back-lodges" functioned the same way, by providing an unfalsifiable explanation for denials from Freemasons. The Illuminati had kept their existence secret from all non-members, which made it particularly difficult to say whether or not they were still active. 18th-century Freemasonry was complicated and rapidly changing. Its opacity would have made it difficult for any Freemason to falsify something based only on experience and inductive reasoning, which in turn prevents outsiders from falsifying it based on positive encounters with Freemasons.

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[44] Even without personal relationships involved, there was clearly a need for nuance. Writing to protest the stigma attached to ex-Jesuits after the order's expulsion from France, Dieudonné Thiébault repeatedly points out that even their accusers and judges agreed that some members — especially the younger ones — were innocent of the flaws ascribed to the order as a whole ([Thiébault] 1764).

According to Asbjørn Dyrendal, "the degree system with initiation into new levels with gradual revelations of knowledge serves as an argument that only the top levels really know what is going on, and that the lower levels are dupes in sinister plans hidden from them" (Dyrendal 2020: 374). Dyrendal highlights the use of degrees as an example of how accurate details are used to strengthen the credibility of otherwise inaccurate statements, but I would argue that the opposite could also be true. Unlike allegations with no basis in reality, claims made about real degrees can be refuted.

While firmly convinced that the Illuminati had taken over lodges across France, Johann August Starck rejected Barruel's discussion of higher degrees as misinformed, and even suggested that Barruel's own initiation story could be a fabrication. Starck recognised the Kadosh as a version of the "Elect" degree from the Clermont rite, but stated that it wasn't known by the name Kadosh to any Freemason (Starck 1803b: 175-176). Starck was clearly mistaken on this last point. The Kadosh degree was known to Freemasons who hadn't received it themselves, even though Starck hadn't encountered the name himself. Both of these circumstances worked to make Barruel's claims less credible; he hadn't heard of it, and he had reason to think that he *would* have heard something if the degree had really existed. Personal experience allowed him to conclude that Barruel's statements were false, but didn't make him doubt claims of ongoing but secret Illuminati infiltration. Recent history of Illuminati infiltration of German lodges made it more plausible that something similar could have happened elsewhere, even if there was no evidence.

As Starck's refutation of Barruel's allegations shows, references to real degree systems can make a conspiracy theory less credible. At the same time, the prevalence of Masonic degrees in conspiracy theories would indicate that the opposite is true. I would argue that this is because of flaws in the "conspiracy theory" category. Even though some definitions don't explicitly include falsehood as a criteria, conspiracy theories are generally understood to be wrong. Because of their inherently questionable nature, the fact that many widespread conspiracy theories use certain arguments doesn't necessarily mean that those arguments make a theory more believable. Arguments that make a theory *less* believable would still result in the same observation if reduced credibility increases its likelihood of being categorised as a conspiracy theory by audiences critical of the theory.

Traits that decrease a conspiracy theory's credibility could also be more likely to draw attention to it through ridicule and refutations.[45] Because scholars and journalists have tended to misinterpret

[45] The resonse to Bonneville's book about Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry could be an example of this. His reasoning is eye-catching, as will be discussed in the third and last chapter. His evidence was based on attempts to tie Masonic symbolism to the Jesuits through words with shared initials and numbers. The book is often mentioned in literature, but according to Bonneville the French original sold only 1200 copies (BdF 1791 #16: 252-253).

increased discussion of conspiracy theories as increasing belief in conspiracy theories (Butter 2020: 458), less credible theories could appear to be more widely believed simply because they are more widely mocked. A similar effect appears to have distorted explanations for anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories. As was discussed in the background chapter discussed, these theories arose almost immediately in the 16th century, and were inspired by a number of events and ideological conflicts. The accusations against them are sometimes explained as the result of a particular book published in 1614. The *Monita Secreta* was allegedly an exposure of internal Jesuit documents, but was quickly revealed as a forgery (Oberhauser 2013: 100-101). Since the Jesuits had been suspected of devious plots for decades when this was published, the Monita Secreta can't be the cause of earlier events. It was a particularly attention-grabbing example of hostility against the Society of Jesus, at least from a modern perspective, but that doesn't justify the historical role attributed to it.

2.2.3. Protestantism

This subchapter will discuss Barruel's ideas of the role played by Protestants and Protestantism in the French Revolution. Although Barruel's theories have been characterised as a modified version of anti-Protestant propaganda, Barruel consistently offered alternative explanations for potential evidence of culpability. His rejection of Protestant involvement, which will be demonstrated below, makes it unlikely that conspiracy theories about Protestants had a significant influence on his thinking. Similar or weaker evidence is accepted against groups like the Knights Templar, which indicates that his attitude towards the group in question was a significant factor in his interpretation of sources.

Amos Hofman emphasises the Protestant leanings of the Illuminati, writing that "[f]or Barruel this immediately denoted its subversive intentions, inherited from Luther's struggle against Catholicism in the sixteenth century" (Hofman 1993: 35). However, this does not match the contents of the *Memoirs*. If anything, Barruel was oddly willing to overlook signs of Protestant involvement. This could have changed in the decades after publishing the *Memoirs*, as with his later belief that Jews were behind the conspiracy. According to Claus Oberhauser, Barruel planned to include at least Luther and Calvin in a book on the ancient roots of the conspiracy (Oberhauser 2013: 272), but the *Memoirs* show a reluctance to amalgamate all opposition to Catholicism. Potential arguments in favour of an anti-Protestant conspiracy theory can be found throughout the *Memoirs*, but Barruel presented alternative explanations for sources that imply Protestant involvement or a pro-Protestant bias on the part of conspirators.

2.2.3.1. Rejected Evidence

Throughout the *Memoirs*, Barruel repeatedly identified Protestantism as a victim rather than a perpetrator of the conspiracy, and he found other ways to explain the conspirators' motives than interest in Protestantism. He did write that one part of the plot came from within Protestantism — more specifically, from theological faculties infiltrated by skeptics — but not without characterising it as a conspiracy against Protestantism (Barruel 1803e: 25). He interpreted the crypto-Catholicism plot myth as a strategy to create distrust of religious leaders and a distraction from real infiltration (Barruel 1803d: xv). He wrote that accusations of plotting with Jesuits were weaponised against anyone who upheld Christian dogma or "preached submission to Sovereigns and the laws of the State".[46]

Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Illuminati, stated that he preferred to recruit Protestants, and according to Barruel "this reflection should at least disabuse those Protestants who obstinately believe that the Catholic Religion is the only one endangered by the hatred of Revolutionaries".[47] Weishaupt also mentioned Lutheran and Reformed theologians and pastors reaching the higher degrees of the Illuminati, and Barruel automatically labelled them apostates. He reasoned that no one could have seen the contents of these degrees without recognising a threat to all religions and all governments (Barruel 1803c: 120), clearly assuming that Protestant theologians and pastors would be naturally hostile to such things.

Barruel wrote that "all Lutheran Universities are filled with Illuminati professors", only to conclude that both sides should to stop pointing the finger at the other, since the Illuminati came out of a Catholic university (Barruel 1803e: 257). He mentioned a Catholic Illuminatus who "didn't believe that he could give the Brothers greater proof of his zeal for Illuminism, than by defending Protestant theses" at a Catholic university, but then wrote that the member's motives were entirely practical and appropriate for neither religion.[48]

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[46] "Tout homme qui osoit défendre un seul de ces dogmes, que les Protestans comme les Catholiques n'ont pu connoître que par la révélation, tout homme qui prêchoit la soumission aux Sourveins et aux lois de l'État, étoit sûr de se voir traité de *Jésuite* ou bien de vil esclave du Jésuitisme" (Barruel 1803e: 41).

[47] "Quant aux différentes Religions, le Législateur Illuminé préfére les disciples de Luther ou de Calvin aux Catholiques. Il aime beaucoup mieux les premiers pour adeptes; et cette réflexion devroit au moins désabuser ceux des Protestans qui s'obstinent à croire la Religion Catholique seule en bute à la haine des Revolutionnaires" (Barruel 1803c: 34-35).

[48] "Dans le nombre des Frères dont Epictète rend compte, il en est cependant quelques-uns qui méritent une attention spéciale. Tel est d'abord ce *Diodore, Illuminé mineur*, ou plutôt l'Illuminé B. E. qui, dans une Université Catholique, et jusqu'à ce moment Catholique lui-même, n'a pas cru pouvoir donner aux Frères de plus grande preuve de son zèle pour l'Illuminisme, qu'en voulant soutenir des thèses protestantes, sous un prétexte qui ne montre ni un Catholique ni un Protestant, mais bien un homme qui ne voit dans toute

The evidence Barruel did not use against Protestants was at least as strong as the evidence he accepted against others, which indicates that his interpretation largely depended on which group was implicated by his sources. Barruel was not afraid of Protestants, which made signs of their involvement with the conspiracy appear less credible. Barruel consistently argued that the Illuminati worked to undermine Protestantism as well as Catholicism, and that Protestant leaders were normally inclined to encourage submission to the state. This is radically different from the image of Protestants found in the kind of propaganda that Hofman views as Barruel's source of inspiration. The following subchapter will continue to discuss this explanation, arguing that the similarities between Barruel and anti-Protestant conspiracy theories probably had other causes.

2.2.3.2. Counter-Enlightenment and Anti-Protestantism

Amos Hofman connects anti-Enlightenment propaganda to earlier anti-Protestant propaganda, and accusations against 16th century Protestants to later conspiracy theories about the Illuminati. He notes that a description of Calvinist meetings sounded less like a religious sect and more like a secret society (Hofman 1988: 165). However, he seems to conclude that one accusation inspired the other without considering that similarities could be caused simply by both groups using similar methods.

As with Timothy Tackett's theory of Jacobin paranoia – and counterrevolutionary reactions to Bonneville's machinations – these conspiracy theories about Calvinists were probably inspired by actual Calvinist conspiracies. Undercover Reformed pastors really had been sent from Geneva to other countries in the 16th century, discreetly converting locals and building secret missionary networks (Stark 2016: 95-96). As with the Illuminati and their efforts to discreetly recruit members from Masonic lodges, missionary strategies used by early Calvinists triggered countermeasures. Based on some early reactions to the famously ambiguous Rosicrucian manifestos, discussed below, it seems that Lutheran methods for detecting hidden Calvinists also resulted in false positives.

The Rosicrucian manifestos were published anonymously in the early 17th century, allegedly to reveal the existence of a secret brotherhood in possession of powerful alchemical secrets. Despite the explicitly Lutheran identity of the brotherhood,[49] multiple Lutheran writers thought the manifesto smacked of Calvinism (Nigrinus 1618; Libavius 1616). Bradford Smith, in an article on Francis Yates' theory linking Rosicrucianism to an international Calvinist movement, writes that such suspicions were common at the time, but that "belief in a conspiracy is not proof that the conspiracy

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religion qu'une affaire de politique. Toute la raison qu'il allégue est que le *Collége des Comtes de Westphalie* est un Collége protestant " (Barruel 1803d: 171).

[49] Members are said to profess a recently purified form of Christianity preached primarily in Germany and some other countries, and receive two sacraments with the ceremonies practiced in the first renovated churches (*Fama fraternitatis* 1615: 45).

ever existed" (Smith 2014: 439). Considering the evidence presented by contemporary writers, these suspicions were evidently inspired more by existing fears than by the texts themselves. As with the Illuminati, the presence of a hidden threat spreading within a group caused a paranoid overreaction among members of that group. Explaining similarities between these reactions as an inherited narrative seems unjustified.

Using these similarities to explain Barruel's conspiracy theory also presumes that Barruel was strongly influenced by anti-Protestant rhetoric, which is not necessarily true. Tackett writes that Barruel contributed to the "*Année litteraire*, a review that relentlessly indicted the philosophes, the Freemasons, and the Protestants for secretly plotting the destruction of both religion and the monarchy" (Tackett: 697). Hofman mentions this fact to support using the Année litteraire to contextualise Barruel's theories, but Barruel seems to have been out of sync with his milieu on this subject. In a review of a book against "tolerantism" Barruel wrote that he would be "very upset if this opinion scandalised [his] readers", but that he believed that Catholicism would be better served by "the destruction of all intolerance all over the world" despite the clear benefits of intolerance.[50] Judging by his apologetic tone, Barruel himself estimated that his attitude was too lax for his readers.

Some counter-revolutionary writers were clearly inspired by anti-Protestant propaganda, but the resemblance demonstrated by Hofman is not enough to show that Barruel was. Similarities between different accusations of subversive plotting do not necessarily prove that one accusation inspired the other. Anti-Enlightenment propaganda resembles anti-Protestant propaganda, but both can be explained as logical conclusions drawn from pro-Catholic propaganda. According to Hofman, "most of the religious criticism of the philosophes (especially after 1770) tended to emphasize not the truth, but rather the usefulness of religion as an instrument in the hands of political authority to uphold law and order" (Hofman: 162). This could explain some similarities between anti-Protestant and counterrevolutionary rhetoric, even without direct influence from one to the other. The former was often supported by allegations that Protestant theology explicitly incited rebellion,[51] and the previous subchapter has shown that Barruel did not believe this.

Barruel's *History of the Clergy During the French Revolution* characterised the events of the Revolution and preceding attempts to undermine Catholicism as validation of the Church's claims of social utility (Barruel 1793: 2-3). However, he attributed a similarly stabilising influence to Protestantism in the *Memoirs,* and interpreted the fact that both philosophes and the Illuminati had a

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[50] "Je serois bien fâché que cette opinion scandalisât mes lecteurs. Je la donne pour ce qu'elle vaut; mais j'oserois croire qu'avec de bons prêtres par-tout le catholicisme gagneroit à ces dispositions" (*Journal Ecclésiastique* September 1789: 91).

[51] As one anonymous text put it, "Calvinism manifested at birth its principles of licence and rebellion. Enemy of all authority, it was the Philosophy of the 16th century, & the precursor to that of the 18th" (*Discours à lire au Conseil* 1787: 4).

particular hatred for Catholicism as evidence that Catholicism was more effective, and therefore a bigger threat to their plans (1803c: 33). Frederick II wrote to Voltaire that Enlightenment philosophy progressed faster in Protestant countries, which Barruel used to interpret the philosophe campaign for civil rights for French Protestants and explain why philosophes hoped for the return of Huguenot refugees. "Calvinising France", as Barruel put it (1803a: 26-28), was a step towards dechristianising France by spreading a form of Christianity that could then be destroyed by abusing "the liberty of Protestantism".[52] Barruel's reaction to the Enlightenment appears to have been strongly influenced by his opinion of Catholicism, but not necessarily Protestantism.

Another reason why accusations of rebellion are a recurring theme is crudely practical; stigmatising opponents as rebellious was strategically useful. Such accusations were often directed at enemies of the Catholic Church because arguing that rebellion would inevitably follow if the Church's teachings were rejected was an effective way to convince rulers to suppress heresy. Barruel did use these accusations as evidence in support of a legendary history of revolutionary ideology written by Condorcet, who claimed various groups as his ideological ancestors. This included the Cathars and the Knights Templar, described by Condorcet as one of the secret societies created to hide the truth from persecutors.[53] Barruel accepted that multiple ancient heretics were ancestors of Masonic back-lodges without further evidence than Condorcet's word, while chiding Anglican historians for defaming their own church by identifying themselves with Waldensians and Cathars.

> Although the cause of the Anglican Church is not my own, I will help it better than all of these bunglers; I will vindicate it from the shame of such an origin. I will prove that rather than belong to the Waldensians, it strongly condemned, both before and after Henry VIII, their disorganising principles; and that there has never been the smallest connection between it and the Albigensians. Only the Jacobins and Condorcet's secret societies get to have ancestors of this kind and take pride in them.[54]

According to another text, attributed to Condorcet, similar slander was common to all groups who wanted to incite authorities against their opponents. Any party could help themselves by making rulers see threats to the party as threats to the ruler ([Condorcet] 1776: 47-50). An example of this

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[52] "En France, les Sophistes conjurés, sans vouloir ni de l'un ni de l'autre, cherchoient à détruire la foi Catholique, par la liberté du Protestantisme; en Allemagne, les Docteurs même du Protestantisme usoient et abusoient de cette liberté, pour lui substituer enfin toute celle du Philosophisme" (Barruel 1803e: 25).

[53] After the invention of the printing press, Condorcet wrote, these secret societies had rescued parts of Europe from the court of Rome (Barruel 1803b: 278). Barruel didn't comment on this part, which was included as part of a larger quote.

[54] "Quoique la cause de l'Eglise Anglicane ne soit pas la mienne, je ferai mieux pour elle que tous ces mal-adroits; je la vengerai de la honte d'une pareille origine. Je prouverai qu'au lieu d'appar tenir aux Vaudois, elle condamna hautement, soit avant, soit après Henri VIII, leurs principes désorganisateurs; et qu'il n'y eut jamais entre elle et les Albigeois le moindre rapport. Il n'est donné qu'aux Jacobins et aux sociétés secrètes de Condorcet d'avoir des ancêtres de cette espèce et de s'en glorifier" (Barruel 1803b: 282).

can be found in the regicidal tendencies imputed to the Jesuits. The accusation allowed opposition to the Jesuits to be presented as concern for the monarch. It was highly effective, and suspicions of regicidal plots led various kings to instigate the suppression of the order in 1773.

Based on what Barruel wrote about Protestants, it seems unlikely that his conspiracy theory was the result of anti-Protestant conspiracy theories from before the Revolution. Similar accusations were made against multiple groups, but that doesn't tell us anything about a causal relationship. While the next subchapter will argue that the infiltration theory promoted by Nicolas Bonneville was directly caused by earlier conspiracy theories, Barruel's attitude to Protestantism shows that similar conclusions cannot be drawn based on narrative similarities alone.

2.3. Bonneville's Conspiracy Theory

This chapter will return to the writings of Nicolas Bonneville. Based on his 1788 book *Les Jésuites chassés de la maçonnerie* ("The Jesuits Expelled From Freemasonry") and articles he wrote during the French Revolution, I will to suggest an explanation for his conspiracy theories about Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry.

Based on the content of his book, it is clear that his theory was not inspired by the evidence. Even when compared to other attempts to prove similar theses, Bonneville's book stands out as unusually irrational and difficult to follow.[55] Nevertheless, Bonneville wrote that his decoding of Masonic legends and symbolism had given him enough to conclude that Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry was as evident as his own existence (1788a: 133-134).

It seems reasonable to assume that Bonneville's infiltration was originally inspired by similar accusations made in German publications earlier that decade. However, the Crypto-Catholicism plot myth was far from convincing to everyone who came into contact with it. This chapter will suggest an explanation for Bonneville's willingness to believe in the Jesuit plot, based primarily on a hypothetical biography gleaned from an interpretation of his writings.

One text in particular – referred to here as the "Rousseau" article – will be used to draw some conclusions about his history with Freemasonry and Catholicism. The article gives few explicit biographical details, but despite allegedly describing the life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau it was clearly intended as a veiled autobiography. The article alludes to a conversion experience involving people that Bonneville believed to be Jesuits, and later to a brief history with Freemasonry that ended with Bonneville's expulsion from his lodge and the publication of his book. Nothing in the articles indicates that he was later involved with the Illuminati, or other Masonic groups.

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[55] A characteristic example is his deciphering of a legendary version of the history of Freemasonry. Saint Alban was said to have founded the first English lodge in 287 A.D., and Bonneville states that this was a veiled reference to the executed king Charles I of England. According to the legend, King Athelstan provided Freemasons with a "charter of liberty" at the request of his brother Edwin. Bonneville calls this detail "shamelessly false"; the real Athelstan had two brothers named Edmond and Edred, which shows the allegorical nature of the story. Athelstan is really Charles II, the son of Charles I, who favoured the Jesuits at the request of his brother, duke of York and later King James II. James established a Jesuit school in London when still styled only as the duke of York, before succeeding his brother as king of England, which is alluded to within Freemasonry under the false name "Grand Lodge of York". Bonneville uses the numerological value of the legendary founding (2+8+7 = 17) as evidence that Freemasonry was actually founded in 1+6+4+6 = 17. Athelstan's charter was dated 9+2+6 = 17, which means that Freemasonry was infiltrated by Jesuits in the year 1+6+8+2 = 17. According to the legend Freemasonry was given new constitutions in 1+3+5+8 = 17, but King Edward III was too busy with war during his reign and this date is therefore an allusion to something else; the higher degrees must have been fabricated by the Jesuits in 1+7+1+8 = 17 (Bonneville 1788b: 22-29).

The article provides some information about Bonneville's emotional state during important moments in the development of his ideas. He consistently described himself as unusually prone to paranoia, with a recurring tendency to suspect people around him. His writings express intense anxiety about Catholicism and the history of the Catholic Church, which he seems to have projected onto the Society of Jesus in particular.

His early reaction to Freemasonry appears to have been strongly influenced by his personal experiences with Catholicism. At the time of writing, several years later, he felt that he had been manipulated and deceived by both. This seems to have caused him to transfer his feelings about Catholicism to Freemasonry, which then inspired his belief that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry by way of identifying Catholicism with Jesuits.

In blaming the Jesuits for everything that frightened him, Bonneville was definitely influenced by the conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists. He often referenced Jansenist authors, and it appears likely that he had a personal history with the Jansenist movement. Some aspects of his writings suggest that Bonneville believed that the Jesuits and the Jansenists were involved with the same plots. His narrative about being manipulated by Jesuits could have been based on experiences with Jansenism.

2.3.1. The "Rousseau" Article

In 1791, the *Bouche de fer* published a letter allegedly sent by a foreign correspondent. The anonymous write used a vaguely worded biography of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to describe an archetypal prophet destined to liberate the peoples of the world. Despite supposedly being about Rousseau, the letter is clearly a literary self-portrait and a veiled retelling of Bonneville's own life (Monglond 1926: 413).

A later issue reveals that the Friends of the Truth received it with sarcastic applause when it was read by the supposed translator. This translator is said to have been used to "seeing the most gentle and fraternal ideas rejected with derision and cruelty" (Bdf 1791 #27: 421) but the response was still upsetting enough to make further reading impossible. If it was not already clear who the unnamed translator was, a footnote lists Bonneville's actions in the early days of the Revolution as examples of the translator's previous experiences with being rejected for having good ideas.[56]

[56] Bonneville admitted to writing it in his book *L'esprit des religions*, but insisted that it was based on his correspondence with a foreign Friend of the Truth (Bonneville 1791: 209).

2.3.2. “Black Spirits”

Bonneville described his Messianic protagonist — i.e. himself — as sensitive and imaginative, as well as simple, frank and open; “he is all that he could be, to invite those who surrounded him to take hold of him, enchain his heart, to take from him the respect of honest people, the benevolence of his friends, his own confidence, his sweetest hopes”. The protagonist is constantly misled from an early age, which forces him to question everything. He can’t resist seduction, and “enchanting images” drag him into a thousand abysses.[57] But, finally, he sees “the glorious contours of a beautiful image of the truth, which rests in the bosom of nature, for fear that the hand of tyrants could disfigure it”. At this point he is miserable, and finds enemies “everywhere and in everything”. He

> believes himself to be at least asleep, intoxicated, deceived by some black spirits whose ruses he doesn’t fully know. Only the truth cannot deceive; *he knows this*: and he embraces it in his thought and in his heart, and in his whole existence.
>
> His soul is ceaselessly active, always awake, always fights, fights even phantoms, against the shadows of danger. Always new trials! Which makes him stronger, more clear-sighted, but also harder, more inflexible! his immense love for the rights of the truth, which awakens so ardently in his heart, awakens equally the audacity of [its/his] enemies.[58]

As can be seen from this quote, Bonneville’s writing is remarkably vague and difficult to interpret. Despite the lack of clear details, however, there is an amount of biographical information to be gleaned from the above quote. Bonneville described some experience that involved other people influencing his beliefs, and as a result of their influence his world-view changed in a way that alienated him from others and caused personal difficulties. He experienced psychological distress and suspected hidden threats everywhere, which included the people around him. A period of internal conflict led him to accept yet another new understanding of the truth, and in hindsight he strongly rejected beliefs that he had accepted earlier. This later rejection appears to have informed

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[57] “toujours simple, franc, toujours ouvert comme la nature, il est tout ce qu’il peur être, pour inviter ceux qui l’envorinnent à s’emparer de lui, à enchaîner son coeur, à lui ravir l’estime des gens honnêtes, la bienveillance de ses amis, sa propre confiances, ses espérances les plus douces. La nature semble l’avoir destiné, dans ses premières années, à être trompé en tout, comme pour le forcer à tout examiner par soi-même.

Il a trop de l’homme, pour apprendre à résister de bonne heure aux charmes de la séduction. Des images enchanteresses, qui lui font illusion, l’entraînent vers mille abymes et l’y plongent” (Bdf 1791 #27: 389-390).

[58] “Comme il en est arrivé à ce degré de misère, où il trouve par-tout et dans tout un ennemi, il accuse sa joie, il se soupçonne, se croit au moins endormi, enivré, abusé par quelques noirs esprits dont il ne connoît point toutes les ruses. La vérité seule ne peut point tromper*; il sait cela*: et il l’embrasse dans sa pensée et dans son coeur, et dans toute son existence.

Son ame est sans cesse en activité, veille toujours, combat toujours, combat même des fantômes, contre des ombres de danger. Toujours de nouvelles épreuves! Ce qui le rend plus fort, plus clair-voyant, mais aussi plus dur, inflexible! son amour immense pour les droits de la vérité, qui se réveille si ardemment dans son cœur, réveille également l’audace de ses ennemis” (Bdf 1791 #27: 391).

his retrospective interpretation of his earlier experiences. Years after these events, Bonneville saw himself as a victim of manipulation and deception.

The following subchapter will argue that Bonneville believed that he had been manipulated by Jesuits. Although this is unreliable as a factual claim, Bonneville's perception of these events are crucial for understanding the causes of his later belief that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry. After this discussion, I will continue to interpret the "Rousseau" article and what it reveals about Bonneville's history with Freemasonry. Based on the conclusions drawn from the article, I will argue that Bonneville's experiences with the "black spirits" influenced his claims about the "impure den", which can be interpreted as a reference to a Masonic lodge.

2.3.2.1. Black Spirits as Jesuits

Considering Bonneville's beliefs about Jesuits at the time the "Rousseau" article was written, they are a likely candidate for the "black spirits whose ruses he didn't fully know" (Bdf 1791 #27: 391). Obviously the ruses of these black spirits must have become known to him by the time he wrote this text, and Bonneville believed that he had uncovered a lot of Jesuit ruses.[59] While this would support identifying the "black spirits" with Jesuits, Bonneville had a tendency to find Jesuits where there were none. The Jesuits were banished from France in 1763, only three years after Bonneville's birth, but he likely believed the "black spirits" to be Jesuits regardless of who they actually were.

Bonneville's later beliefs about Jesuits could be partially explained as a reaction to the experience alluded to. He worried about symbolic mind control, which could have been inspired by a retrospective attempt to make sense of his own past behaviour. Bonneville is obviously an unreliable source where Jesuits are concerned, but it seems reasonable to interpret his black spirits as Catholics who gained his trust at a young age. After Bonneville's beliefs changed, the memory of that trust became frightening and difficult to understand and justify. Bonneville's perception of this part of his life offers a partial explanation for his later fears of Jesuits secretly brainwashing people through Freemasonry. He appears to have believed that this had happened to him, albeit outside of a Masonic context.

The following subchapters will continue to discuss this article. I will argue that although the article is consistently vague, there is enough detail there to conclude that Bonneville alluded to some

[59] Another autobiographical allegory — this time a play — explains that the character representing Bonneville had uncovered a bloodthirsty plot by "la secte des Noirs" (Bonneville 1790: 33). This "sect" is obviously the Society of Jesus, although other parts of the play uses "Noirs" as a name for the clergy in general. A monologue from the play was included in a 1791 issue of the Bouche de fer with a number of alterations, including a paraghraph that changes "Blacks" (Bonneville 1790: 64) to "Priests" (Bdf 1791 #38: 33). It seems reasonable to assume that "black" is a reference to commonly worn black cassocks, which would be equally applicable to Jesuits in particular or priests in general.

personal experiences with Freemasonry. Based on the article and his *Les jésuites chassés de la maçonnerie,* it can be concluded that Bonneville was initiated after his experience with people he believed to be Jesuits. He apparently continued to be afraid of Jesuits, and continued to experience paranoia.

2.3.3. "The Impure Den"

In the account of his encounter with the "black spirits", Bonneville alluded to discovering some kind of truth. He apparently struggled with this for some time, but finally embraced it. After this point, Bonneville continued his veiled autobiography:

> He no longer fears to stray; he has a point of support. That which he finds everywhere, that's God; and and [sic] he sees the truth everywhere where he finds God.
>
> In the book of creation, the heart of man, which is such a beautiful page of it, became his dearest object of study. How man has lost his dignity! To discover the cause, he goes to consult the annals of humanity; he searches the depths of sanctuaries, to see if the rights and hopes of the true children of nature could be hidden there under the bloodied veils of fanaticism, and torn to shreds by ferocious hypocrisy, which he recognises by its genuflections, its inquisitions and its daggers!
>
> What did he find in the impure den which they, these brigands, call the temple of light, of joy, of brotherhood? -- Mournful cries, blind men, victims, blindfolds, a horizon full of shadows, blood, pyres, anathemas… He cries out as he recoils in horror, "Hell is empty, they're all here!"[60]

Blood-soaked visions and the shadows of "multiple millions of unfortunates, sacrificed, killed, butchered by priests" pursue him, and "this overly sensitive man" becomes "a man of iron".[61]

According to Bonneville's own account, his behaviour at the time made him appear sick. He

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[60] "Il ne craint plus de s'égarer; il a un point d'appui. Ce qu'il trouve par-tout, c'est Dieu; et et [sic] il voit par-tout la vérité où il trouve Dieu.

Dans le livre de la création, le cœur de l'homme, qui en est une si belle page, devient son étude la plus chere. Que l'homme est déchu de sa dignité! Pour en découvrir la cause, il va consulter les annales de l'humanité; il cherche au fond des sanctuaires, si les droits et les espérances des vrais enfans de la nature n'y seroient point cachés sous les voiles ensanglantés du fanatisme, et mis en lambeaux par l'hypocrisie farouche, qu'il reconnoît à ses génuflexions, à ses inquisitions et à ses poignards!

Qu'a-t'il trouvé dans l'antre impur qu'ils appellent, ces brigands, le temple de la lumière, de la joie, de la fraternité? -- Des cris funèbres, des aveugles, des victimes, des bandeaux, un horizon plein de ténèbres, de sang de bûchers, d'anathêmes… Il s'écrie en reculant d'horreur, "L'enfer est vuide, ils sont tous là"!" (Bdf 1791 #27: 392).

[61] "Mais sur ses pas se précipitent des images toutes dégoûtantes de sang, les ombres de plusieurs millions d'infortunés, sacrificiés, tués, égorgés par les prêtres. Le tumulte de son sang, et l'orage qui s'y élève, font de cet homme trop sensible, un homme de fer, pour renverser le colosse monstrueux du fanatisme!" (Bdf 1791 #27: 393).

seemed to have lost his mind, crying out in the public square that the whole world is God's temple, and that God's only laws are "love, friendship, brotherhood and equality".[62]

> Soon the supposed sages, and the so-called friends of humanity, notice that his penetrating eye reads hearts, and they close the door to him; but he, he sees across the door, into the recesses of their souls. His gaze, despite every obstacle, will show them that they will be held to account for their false virtues.[63]

He is met with contempt, but some try to negotiate and stop him from exposing their shame. The biographical narrative ends shortly after this point. Bonneville wrote that he had to create a new language, because ordinary languages no longer fit his soul and his thoughts (Bdf 1791 #27: 394), and then named Rousseau as the alleged inspiration for his portrait of a revolutionary hero. Bonneville's exclusion from the temple, his denunciation and his creation of a new language were probably fairly recent if nothing more had to be said at the time of writing.

In the following subchapter, I will argue that this part of the story was intended to convey Bonneville's experiences with Freemasonry. There are some striking similarities between this part of the story and the earlier narrative, which I have argued was an allusion to Bonneville's history with Catholicism. Again, Bonneville described himself as paranoid and afraid of the people around him. From his book, published in 1788, we know that he believed that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry. Based on what is implied in the "Rousseau" article, this suspicion seems to have been part of a pattern.

2.3.3.1. Impure Den as Masonic Lodge

Susanne Kleinert interprets this part of the story as an allusion to Bonneville's history with Catholicism (Kleinert: 124). While I agree that Bonneville's description of the "impure den" does reference Catholicism, this is explained by his fears of Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry. As was argued in the previous subchapter, Bonneville had already alluded to a history with Catholicism in an earlier section of the story. If that interpretation is correct, the "impure den" would have to be something else.

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[62] "Vous le prendriez pour un malade, qui a perdu le sense, commun à tous les hommes, car il s'en va criant par les places publiques: "où allez-vous chercher la nature, les joies fraternelles et la céleste liberté? Tout ce qui n'est pas conforme à la nature, n'est que fable et fantôme. Tout ce qui vient de Dieu est doux et pur, et sans tyrannie. Le monde entier est son temple, celui qui s'occupe du bonheur de ses enfans, est son *envoyé*, son ministre. Amour, amitié, fraternité, égalité, *voilà toutes les loix,* écrites *par tout* dans la nature" (Bdf 1791 #27: 393).

[63] "Bientôt les prétendus sages, et les soi-disans amis des hommes, s'apperçoivent que son oeil pénétrant lit dans les coeurs, et ils lui ferment la porte; mais lui, il voit à travers la porte, jusques dans les replis de leur ame. Son regard, malgré tout obstacle, va leur apprendre qu'il leur sera demandé compte de leurs fausses vertus" (Bdf 1791 #27: 393-394).

The story is vague and ambiguous, but appears to describe Bonneville's experiences with Freemasonry. According to Bonneville the "impure den" was falsely called a temple of light, joy and fraternity. Both fraternity and happiness were central to the image of Freemasonry presented to outsiders at the time, at least according to the abbé Barruel, who uses that fact when making his case. Barruel reasons that Freemasons swear to never reveal their secrets, which must mean that the secrets in question must be something they don't reveal.[64] Since Freemasons won't *stop* revealing how much fun they have with their brothers or how much good they accomplish with charitable works, Barruel concludes that their secrets are something other than "this fraternity, something less innocent than the joy of Masonic toasts".[65] As for light and blindfolds, Christina L. Voss shows that both were important symbols that would be encountered by anyone initiated into an English lodge. Symbolically, the two are explicitly linked; an initiate is said to seek light, and is said to receive light when his blindfold is removed (Voss 2003: 194-197).

The horizon full of death and destruction seems like a description of Bonneville's fears for the future rather than an allusion to what he had already witnessed. These fears were a projection of his feelings about the Catholic Church and its history, which explains why his description of Freemasonry sounded like a nightmarish vision of Catholicism. Elsewhere, he moved seamlessly from writing about one to discussing the other. In his book, Bonneville explained that he thought a "complete history of the society of Freemasons, confirmed by authentic sources" was the simplest way to

> disabuse honest people who are dragged toward murder & slavery, while always speaking to them of independence, innocent games, & beneficence & *equality*. Thus the pontiffs, when they were still in Rome only small bishops without power, spoke of *fraternity*, of common ownership; but always of *blind* obedience to the orders of the Eternal One, whose representatives they humbly called themselves. As soon as they had *armed* their brothers to *avenge the cause of a God drunk on blood,* you saw nothing in them except monster of cruelty.[66]

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[64] Bonneville had a similar reaction to the idea that oaths would be sworn to preserve secrets that have already been given so much publicity (Bonneville 1788: 156).

[65] "Ce que les Maçons cachent n'est pas ce que l'on peut trouver de louable dans leur association; ce n'est pas cet esprit de fraternité, de bienveillance générale qu'ils avoient de commun avec tout religieux observateur de l'Evangile; ce ne sont pas même les plaisirs, les douceurs de leur égalité, de leur union, de leurs repas fraternels. Au contraire, ils exaltent sans cesse leur esprit de bienfaisance, et personne n'ignore les plaisirs des adeptes convives. Il est donc dans leur secret quelque chose d'une toute autre nature que cette fraternité, quelque chose de moins innocent que la joie des santés Maçonniques" (Barruel 1803b: 202).

[66] "Une histoire complete de la société des Francs Maçons, confirmée par des monuments authentiques, est le seul moyen que nous ayons cru devoir adopter, comme le plus simple, pour détromper d'honnêtes gens qu'on entraîne au meurtre & à l'esclavage, en leur parlant toujours d'indépendance , de jeux innocents , & de bienfaisance & *d'égalité*. Ainsi les pontifes, lorsqu'ils n'étoient encore à Rome que de petits évêques sans pouvoir , parloient de *fraternité* , d'une communauté de biens; mais toujours d'une obéissance

Christianity was the precedent Bonneville used to predict what Freemasonry will become. Both had lovely rhetoric, and Christian history shows that lovely rhetoric can be used to hide seeds of terror. Fanaticism and ridiculous hopes can still "arm a brother against his brother; drown entire peoples in blood" (Bonneville 1788a: 35).

Presumably, the denunciation mentioned near the end of the autobiographical section was Bonneville's book from 1788. He didn't allude to any further initiations or any contact with organised Freemasonry after this. He instead credited himself with the creation of the new language needed to hold his thoughts, and those thoughts weren't attributed to any of his initiations. The lack of anything resembling initiation into the Illuminati further supports the tentative conclusions drawn in subchapter 2.1.4, that Bonneville did not join the Order of the Illuminati at any point.

2.3.4. Causes of Bonneville's Infiltration Theory

The previous subchapters argued that probably Bonneville encountered Freemasonry in the wake of an upsetting experience with Catholicism. He was probably influenced by some Catholics to change his religious beliefs, and he later identified these people as Jesuits. This experience appears to have informed his subsequent beliefs about Freemasonry. It seems likely that Bonneville's mental state also contributed significantly to how he perceived these experiences. Bonneville described himself as paranoid and fearful, and the narrative structure of the "Rousseau" article implies a connection between periods of particularly intense anxiety and the experiences incorporated into his infiltration theory. While this would explain why he developed some kind of conspiracy theory, it doesn't clarify why he developed *this* conspiracy theory.

The following subchapters will argue that Bonneville's reaction to Freemasonry was largely inspired by his earlier perception of Catholicism, and that he projected pre-existing anxieties onto Freemasonry. I will further argue that Bonneville's fear of Catholicism was expressed as a fear of Jesuits because of conflicts within French society, and particularly within French Catholicism.

2.3.4.1. Detecting Black Spirits in the Impure Den

According to Steven Luckert, the Jesuit infiltration theory in Germany was triggered by a "crisis of origins, conscience, and direction" (Luckert 1993: 206). The Strict Observance had a particularly dramatic history in this regard. Their Templar origin was suddenly falsified, leaving in its wake "a climate of suspicion, disillusion, and anger" (Luckert: 214). Bonneville appears to have had a similar reaction to his own loss of faith in Masonic legends. His book (Bonneville 1788a) alludes to

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aveugle aux ordres de l'Eternel, dont ils se disoient humblement les représentants. A peine eurent-ils *armé* leurs freres pour *venger la cause d'un Dieu altéré de sang*, qu'on ne vit plus en eux que des monstres de cruauté" (Bonneville 1788: 22).

promises of ancient tradition having been a primary reason for his attraction to Freemasonry. In retrospect, he alleged that spurious claims of antiquity were a trick intended to make initiates search endlessly for an answer without being discouraged when the answer is never revealed. Instead of ridiculing "the most bizarre ceremonies, he respectfully submits his reason".[67] This choice of words was obviously intentional, and a clear allusion to how many Catholic writers of the 17th and 18th centuries encouraged Christians to respond to dogma.[68] When he wrote the book, Bonneville's reaction to this rhetoric was a combination of contempt and fear. He clearly thought demands for cognitive submission were effective, which explains his fears that Masonic legends could be used to brainwash initiates by making them believe something without proof. As with the "black spirits" and their "enchanting images", he was disturbed by the fact that he once believed something he later rejected.

Comparing different parts of his account shows that Bonneville's conspiracy theory was reversal of earlier, positive impressions. The Jesuits represented religious violence and obscurantism, and he saw Freemasonry as protection from both. According to his account, he first regarded Masonic symbolism as the opposite of blind faith: "Whatever explanation is given to him", allegory allows him to draw his own conclusions about hidden truth (Bonneville 1788a: 16-17). Meanwhile, the goal of the Jesuits "was to eradicate from the world all research in religious matters, which is to say, in all matters that could offend them".[69] By contrast, Bonneville had believed that Masonic allegory could be used to protect "the truth from the furors of superstition drunk on the blood of its brother" by hiding secrets from evil or indiscreet people.[70] Later in the book Freemasonry is said to play the

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[67] "il cherche à toutes les allégories monstrueuses un sens naturel qui le satisfasse; loin de jeter quelques ridicules sur les cérémonies les plus bizarres, il y soumet la raison avec respect, pour conserver l'allégorie intégre & pure: il regarde ces allégories comme un voile tiré entre l'histoire perdue & celle qui nous reste" (Bonneville 1788a: 15-16).

[68] Robert-François de Montargon, writing to instruct parish priests, explained that one must use reason "to know if our religion comes from God; & once we have been enlightened on this point, we must submit our reason, & believe all the other articles of Faith" (Montargon 1767: 466). He illustrated his point by comparing a blind man healed by Jesus to Thomas the doubting apostle:

> The blind man of Jericho believes before seeing; Thomas wants to see before believing: the one reasons; the other submits: the one worships the Son of David in his humble prayer, & only sees him with the eyes of faith; the other wants to enter into the Mysteries of a crucified God, & only recognises his saviour when his senses have persuaded him of his existence. What is the fruit of such opposed conduct? the blind man is enlightened for his docility; this is the role model for our faith: the incredulous Apostle is rebuked for his presumption; this is the obstacle to our faith. Such is the lesson that the Ministers of the Lord have given you a hundred times, & which you must never lose from view; & it is with this in mind that I have made efforts to persuade you to submit your reason to the oracles of the Faith, & to sacrifice your passions to the certitude of your faith (Montargon: 480).

[69] "Le but des jésuites étoit d'extirper sur la terre tout principe de recherches en matiere de religion, c'est-à-dire, en toute matiere qui pouvoit les offenser" (Bonneville 1788a: 148-149).

[70] "il aime l'artifice innocent des allégories qui protegent la vérité contre les fureurs de la superstition altérée du sang de son frere . Quelle que soit l'explication qu'on lui en donne, il y cherche le sien dans ces miroirs à plusieurs faces que le génie fut contraint d'employer pour abuser les méchants & les indiscrets" (Bonneville 1788a: 16-17).

opposite role, providing fanaticism with shadows to protect it from the Enlightenment (Bonneville 1788a: 46). According to Bonneville's retrospective narrative, his hopes in the beginning were a mirror image of what he later feared. He reversed his earlier position and came to believe that Freemasonry was the very threat he had wanted protection from, meaning that Jesuits were secretly leading irrationally obedient initiates towards future violence.

This subchapter has argued that Bonneville's Jesuit infiltration theory was inspired by a pre-existing fear of Jesuit mind control. The following subchapters will discuss his focus on the Jesuits in particular. I will argue that scapegoating found in contemporary public discourse in France could be part of the reason why Bonneville's more general rejection of Catholicism took the form of anti-Jesuitism. Later, I will argue that the details of Bonneville's experiences with Catholicism likely played a role. If Bonneville had previously been a Jansenist, this would explain his extremely animosity towards Jesuits. There are also some indications that the "black spirits" were actually Jansenists, and that Bonneville eventually came to believe that the Jesuits were secretly behind the anti-Jesuit side of Catholicism.

2.3.4.2. Why Jesuits?

While it seems clear enough that Bonneville did believe that the conversion experience alluded to in the "Rousseau" article involved Jesuits, this can't be taken at face value. In light of claims found in the article and his other writings, it seems reasonable to presume that the identification had little to do with their actual identities. The primary reason for his later belief in Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry appears to be a tendency to detect Jesuits. Explaining his fear of Jesuits is therefore a necessary step to explaining multiple parts of his narrative.

The specific details of Bonneville's accusations against Jesuits, and his general hostility towards them, have much in common with polemics from both the 17th and 18th centuries. While Protestant propaganda tended to attack Jesuits as a way to tarnish Catholicism, Catholic writers often used similar claims to the opposite end. Rather than make Catholics look bad, the Jesuits made the Church as a whole look better by carrying a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for anything objectionable.[71]

Something similar can be seen in the political sphere. Shortly before the Revolution, within the context of debates over religious tolerance, Jesuits were widely blamed for the harshly criticised

[71] In responses to the Provincial Letters, Jesuits emphasised that many of the "lax" moral theories castigated by Pascal were common among Catholic theologians. Calvinist polemicists often cited the same theories from the same authors, attributing them to Catholicism as a whole, which Jesuits thought proved that Jansenists criticised Jesuit theologians to hide their rejection of Catholic moral theology (Nouet et al 1658; Pirot 1659). Pascal's response, written on behalf of the parish priests of Paris, accused the Jesuits of defaming the Catholic Church arm in arm with the Calvinists by imputing "such detestable maxims" to the Church itself (Pascal 1895: 444-456).

1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a decision which had ended a long period of tolerance for French Calvinists. A booklet attributed to Condorcet denounced "the violence with which the Jesuits soiled the reign of Louis XIV" by tricking "a naturally humane king" into ordering cruelty ([Condorcet] 1778: 3). According to Geoffrey Adams, blaming the Jesuits was part of a conscious strategy. Louis XVI was reluctant to reverse earlier decisions made by his illustrious predecessor. Supporters of tolerance found the solution to this problem in historiography; they didn't have to take a stand against measures put into place by the famously pious Louis XIV if they instead positioned themselves as enemies of measures put into place by others for personal gain (Adams 1999: 266).

Blaming the Jesuits for oppression seems to have been an especially useful strategy because of widespread suspicions that the Jesuits' motives were something other than religious fervour. Their hostility to Protestants was explained as a response to opposition they had failed to overcome with non-violent means.[72] The accusation that Jesuits persecuted Protestants to get rid of skeptics and critics, is especially interesting in light of certain details in Bonneville's conspiracy theory, which reveal a preoccupation with faith as a method of control.[73]

Bonneville's writings show that he felt a kinship with what he understood Protestantism to be. He wrote that Protestants used coded messages to express support for free interpretation and defend the conscience of the individual against the obligation to believe (1788a: 146), which resembles how he described his early attraction to Freemasonry (1788a: 16-17). Bonneville claimed that the name "Protestant" was originally given to the Cathars, whose Gnostic beliefs were received throughout Europe because of sympathy inspired by their persecution. According to his version, Protestantism therefore belonged to the same secret religious tradition as Freemasonry. In a list of Protestant "families" he placed Cathars, Lutherans and Calvinists next to Ophites, Bogomilists and Gnostics. He also implied that all of these groups used coded language to protect themselves from the Jesuits, without explaining the obvious chronological problem this raises (Bonneville 1788a: 144-147). Bonneville's lack of concern for historical accuracy on this point seems to indicate that he projected

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[72] An earlier edict had banned Reformed preachers from contradicting Catholic dogma, and the pamphlet attributed to Condorcet concluded that since Louis XIV was convinced that Catholicism could stand up to scrutiny the edict must have been "sollicited by some Jesuit theologians, who had written bad books of controversy, that the Protestants made fun of" ([Condorcet]: 5). The abbé Guidi thought they wanted revenge for criticism of their bad moral theology, and explained animosity from religious orders in general as a reaction to Protestants criticising them and mocking their false relics and profitable superstition (Guidi 1778: 101)

[73] His writings often reference blind obedience and blind faith as distinctive characteristics of Jesuit manipulation. This theme inspired his interpretation of blindfolds used in Masonic initiation rituals, which he alluded to in the "Rousseau" article (Bdf 1791 #27: 392). After his opininions about Catholicism were projected onto Freemasonry, he interpreted the blindfold as evidence of hidden affiliations. Where Freemasonry is concerned, the blind faith seems to have been mostly about its legendary history, which was often presented as factually accurate at the time.

his feelings about Catholicism in general onto the Jesuits in particular. As already mentioned in this subchapter, similar tendencies can be found among his contemporaries and earlier writers.

In the next subchapter, I will argue that Bonneville's opinions on Catholicism were more likely than not inspired by past experiences with Jansenism. As discussed in the background chapter on Jansenism, the Jansenists were engaged in a long and painful conflict with the Jesuits. If his experience with Catholicism was specifically an experience with Jansenist Catholicism, Bonneville's later identification of Catholicism with the Jesuits could account for his hostility to the Jesuits as well as his obsession with deceit and mind control. Below, I will present some sources indicating that Bonneville did have a history with Jansenism. Based on this and some of his other writings, I will argue that is is possible that Bonneville believed that the extremely anti-Jesuit Jansenists were in fact secretly Jesuits themselves.

2.3.4.3. Was Bonneville a Jansenist?

This subchapter will argue that Jansenist influences are a probable source for Bonneville's anti-Jesuit beliefs. The origin of Bonneville's anti-Jesuitism is essential to an explanation of his particular infiltration theory, but could also help to clarify his possible connection to the Order of the Illuminati. His book alleging that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry, and Bode's speedy translation of it, is the only real sign of his involvement with the Illuminati before the Revolution. A Jansenist source for his suspicions would weaken its evidentiary value by providing an alternative explanation for his acceptance of the Crypto-Catholic plot myth. Although I haven't found any direct evidence that Bonneville had a personal history as a Jansenist, some details of his writings point in that direction. Frequent references to Jansenist sources indicate that their perspective probably had a strong impact on him, even if he didn't have an immediate connection to the Jansenist movement.

Hostility against the Jesuits was widespread in 18th century Europe, but it wasn't the same everywhere. The hostility expressed in the article dedicated to Jesuits in the *Encyclopédie*, or in other texts by Enlightenment philosophes, the Jesuits are rarely ascribed the uniquely intense malevolence described in Jansenist or Illuminati literature. Bonneville was an avid reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who he obviously felt a deep kinship with. While Rousseau's assessment of the Jesuits was negative, it probably wouldn't have inspired something like Bonneville's intense fear.[74] Despite his unambiguous rejection of Christian doctrine, I would argue that Bonneville's anti-Jesuitism was probably more inspired by Jansenism than by the religiously skeptical philosophes.

[74] Rousseau suspected that the Jesuits were disingenuous in their attacks on Jansenism (Rousseau 1764: 54). He also suspected that Jansenism would turn out to be a bigger threat once the Jesuits were gone (Rousseau 1839: 623).

Although the Jesuit infiltration theory had more of an impact in Germany, Bonneville was far from alone in his fears regarding Jesuit plots after their suppression in France. The idea that Jesuits posed a constant threat despite the apparent end of the order was also expressed by their old Jansenist enemies. In *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France* (1975) historian Dale van Kley summarises the Jansenists' strange failure to stop fighting the Society of Jesus. Even after the society itself had ceased to exist, the Jansenist propaganda machine continued to fight phantom Jesuits as if nothing had happened. For decades, they continued to suspect Jesuit influence and even Jesuit infiltration of various French institutions (Van Kley: 226-228).

Existing Jansenist suspicions about what the Jesuits were up to was apparently sufficient to lend credibility to the anti-Catholic conspiracy theory in Germany. When the Jansenist newspaper *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* reviewed a pamphlet on this subject, allegedly authored by the prominent revolutionary politician Honoré Mirabeau,[75] the judgement was mostly positive. Despite a stated unwillingness to vouch for the pamphlet's contents, the concluding paragraph stated that its sources were too convincing to be contested. The reviewer can't be suspected of belonging to the Illuminati, but found their conspiracy theories plausible enough to be added to the list of accusations against the Jesuits.[76] Based on the example provided by the anonymous reviewer, it seems that Bonneville's adoption of the Jesuit infiltration theory could be explained even if he never had direct contact with the Illuminati.

Much of Bonneville's past is unclear, which makes it difficult to say with any certainty if he did or didn't have any involvement with Jansenism. Based on his writings, he was obviously influenced by Jansenist writers. Throughout *Les jésuites chassés de la Maçonnerie*, Bonneville referenced Pascal's 1656 *Provincial Letters* to support his characterisation of the Jesuits' moral theology.

Whether on not Bonneville had anything to do with Jansenists before the Revolution, he was close to quite a few from its early days. The most prominent members of the Friends of the Truth, except for Bonneville himself, were Claude Fauchet and Goupil de Préfelne. They held the positions of "Attorney General for the Cercle Social" and president of the Federative Assembly, respectively. Both Fauchet (1790) and Goupil de Préfelne (Tacket 2014: 66) were decidedly Jansenist. Both knew Bonneville before the opening of the Federative Assembly, since they are mentioned in the journal

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[75] *Lettre Du Comte De Mirabeau* (1786). The author used and translated sources written in German, a language Mirabeau didn't speak according to his Prussian ghostwriter Jakob Mauvillon (1792: xvii).

[76] "Il n'est quere possible de contester ces faits, puisqu'ils sont appuyés des Ecrits publics que cite M. de Mirabeau. Que n'ajoutent-ils pas à l'idée qu'on avoit déjà de la politique, de l'intrigue, des machinations de la Société proscrite!" (*Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* 13 November 1786: 187-188).

Cercle social as having either contributed material or contacted the editor (*Cercle social* 1790: 243, 377-387). The same journal also names the "venerable old man" Goupil de Préfelne with other members of the National Assembly. Based on the context, he and "honest Camus", "Biauzat, whose republican voice is that of the truth" and "worthy Fréteau" appear to be representatives that Bonneville knew personally.[77] Except for Gaultier de Biauzat all of these representatives belonged to the "small core of jurists" in the Jansenist camp of the National Assembly, according to Timothy Tackett (2014: 66).

Explicit mentions of Jansenism are much less common in Bonneville's writings than references to the Jesuits. Occasionally, the Jansenist controversy is alluded to in his statements about Jesuits A *Bouche de fer* article from April 1791, primarily dedicated to showcasing quotes from *De la monarchie prussienne* that praise his book on the Jesuit infiltration theory, opens with reassurance from Bonneville that the article isn't intended to present "formularies or articles of *faith*" (BdF 1791 #40: 61). This is a reference to the formulary controversy, which was discussed briefly in the introductory background chapter on Jansenism. Considering the importance of this controversy to French society in general, however, merely mentioning the formulary controversy is not particularly significant.

Later, the same *Bouche de fer* article touches on one of the stranger aspects of Bonneville's Jesuit theory. He accused the Jesuits and the parlements, generally considered a bastion of Jansenism, of secretly working together (Bdf 1791 #40: 66), even though the parlements were responsible for suppressing the Society of Jesus in France. According to an earlier article in the journal *Cercle social* (1790: 312) he had known that the "parliamentary system was that of the remnants of Jesuitism" ever since the time Jean-Jacques Duval d'Eprémesnil (1745-1794) had tried to make the parlements all-powerful. If Bonneville's description of the development of his ideas is accurate, this would mean that he had suspected that the parlements were part of a Jesuit plot since 1787-1788, when d'Eprémesnil had become an icon of parliamentary resistance to royal authority (Lefebvre 1982: 30-31). Bonneville was in London at the time, but styled himself "lawyer [avocat] of the parlement of Paris" (Bonneville 1787) in an open letter to Condorcet. Apparently he suspected his own colleagues of complicity with the Jesuit plot, which is particularly interesting considering his other accusations against groups he had previously been a member of.

[77] After addressing them, Bonneville turned to "Wimpfen, Treilhard, de Menou, de Champeaux, Palasne, Cottin and de l'Epeaux, all of you who I don't know well enough, but who I would respect simply for finding you in such honorable company" (Cercle social 1790: 326). Since he specifically mentioned that he didn't know these representatives, he presumably knew the others well enough to judge the second group by association.

He published his book alleging Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry in 1788, and wrote later that the parlements "whose cause was tied to the cause of the Hypocrites" had decried it (Cercle social 1790: 314). By hypocrites tied to the parlements, he probably meant Jansenists. Elsewhere, he described the Palace of Justice as being "in convulsions" when the book was condemned (Tribun du peuple 1789, lettre XI: 94). Similarly derogatory reference to convulsionaries, a particular group of Jansenists who considered the ecsatic convulsions experienced by some of them to be a miraculous sign of divine favour, appear in several of his texts.[78]

Judging by a jab at some unnamed group that wanted to "snuff out the truth" with their "convulsive furor" against "those who go too far" (BdF 1791 #17: 261), Bonneville might have identified Jansenism with revolutionaries he considered too moderate. He made similar statements about Jesuits, who Bonneville believed were behind the Jacobin club and the Monarchists (BdF 1791 #38: 26-30). At the time, both groups were on the conservative side of the revolutionary movement.

Taken together with Bonneville's claims about parlements conspiring with the Jesuits, the alleged link between moderate revolutionaries and both Jesuits *and* Jansenists might justify an interpretative hypothesis that would otherwise seem extremely improbable. When Bonneville described being deceived by the "black spirits", it's possible that these were Jansenists that he eventually came to believe were actually Jesuits. This would explain why his narrative emphasised deception and hidden enemies. If the "black spirits" had actually been Jesuits, his characterisation of them and his experiences would be more difficult to understand. Considering his efforts to recruit Freemasons despite his theories about Jesuit infiltration, Bonneville identifying Jansenism as a part of the Jesuit plot wouldn't necessarily conflict with his involvement in a Jansenist network.

Without more information, it seems difficult to be entirely certain of Bonneville's personal history. However, a Jansenist connection seems likely, and Jansenist influences from literature are clearly demonstrated by references made in his writings. These influences explain his conspiracy theory about Jesuits, at least in part, but the same obviously can't be true of the original source of the anti-Jesuit discourse that inspired him.

2.3.5. Explaining Anti-Jesuit Conspiracy Theories

The background chapter discussed how events that took place during the Jesuits' first decades in France turned public opinion against them, and how the consequent Jansenism controversy strengthened this antipathy. These early forms of anti-Jesuit sentiment in France can't be explained

[78] For example, a letter probably written by Bonneville mentions an earlier article causing "convulsions among the Convulsionaries" (Cercle social 1790: 372).

without its original context, but later offshoots can hardly be understood as the result of events from centuries earlier. Nicolas Bonneville's beliefs about a Jesuit plot to infiltrate Freemasonry was based on earlier conspiracy theories, but his theory can't be explain as the inevitable outcome of his historical background. Its content differed in significant ways, and the passage of time from the relevant historical historical events used as evidence makes it even harder to use the original accusations as evidence. Moreover, the prevalence of irrational expressions is unhelpful for explaining the original sources of controversy in the 16th- and 17th centuries.

In this subchapter, I will argue that the causes of Bonneville's conspiracy theory differed from his distant predecessors, and also from his German counterparts only a few years earlier. At the same time, the Crypto-Catholic plot myth could have had the same psycho-social causes as the Crypto-Calvinist panic from the 16th century and later fears of Illuminati subversion.

Circumstances indicated by Jesuit historian Charles Daniel (1818-1893) can explain the Crypto-Catholicism plot myth in a way that accounts for both its timing and its attacks against conservative theologians. Daniel compares the situation in Protestant Germany to the Oxford movement of his own time, which influenced Anglicanism in a more Catholic direction. Daniel explains the conspiracy theory on the 1780s as a reaction to a similarly catholicising tendency, which he partially attributed to backlash against religious skepticism (Daniel 1866: 368-369). Considering the hostility it met from certain Anglicans, the Oxford movement is an interesting comparison.

Steven Luckert mentions that actual attempts at reunification happened around the time of the Crypto-Catholicism controversy in the 1780s, but doesn't seem to count them among the causes of the conspiracy theory. Instead, he describes reunification projects as an expression of enlightened religious tolerance (Luckert 1993: 236). Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), on the other hand, reacted to "unpleasant" new details about one of these attempts by declaring that Friedrich Nicolai, the most notorious propagator of the conspiracy theory, "does not appear to have been so mistaken after all" (Harnack 2005: 27).

In 1779, conservative Protestants had joined Catholic Benedictines in what could be described as a secret think tank for ecumenical theology. Although the Catholic side of the project would be categorised as "Enlightened", along with others who worked toward unifying the churches, they and the plan they participated in were firmly opposed to the religiously skeptical tendencies of the Enlightenment. Unorthodox Protestants like Friedrich Nicolai had little reason to wish them success in their attempt to, as von Harnack described it, save Protestant Orthodoxy from rationalistic Biblical criticism through a reunification with Catholicism (Harnack 2005: 26-27). Such a reunification would inevitably have marginalised Protestant rationalists by creating an alliance of their opponents from both churches.

Enlightenment Catholicism would probably have been particularly threatening to opponents of the unification plan, by presenting a more appealing version of Catholicism and making reunification more plausible. While it might seeming paradoxical to panic in response to religious tolerance and the shrinking influence of the papacy, as Luckert (223) describes, these developments in a more Gallican direction increased the risk of reunification by making Catholicism more attractive from a Protestant perspective. The Gallican journalist Edouard de Bucy, who could be considered a 19th-century descendant of Enlightenment Catholicism, wrote that the "adversaries of the Church" preferred to see it as "a sacristy populated by idiots and inquisitors; the only true Catholics, to them, are amulet-laden pope-worshippers […] Consequently if they are talking about Gallicans and Ultramontanists, they will side with the latter against the former, to be able to tell their adepts that you can only be a Catholic under pain of renouncing common sense" (de Bucy 1856: 42). In France, Protestant writers had employed this unsubtle strategy for centuries, using the Jesuits as evidence against claims made by other Catholics about the nature of Catholicism. Diversity within Catholicism was interpreted as deception, and the more appealing alternative would be denounced as a trap.[79] This had already been a problem for attempts at reunification in the 1690s (Leibniz 1847: 50, 315).

Instead of seeing it as a theory about Jesuits or Freemasons that happened to target conservative Protestants, I would argue that the Crypto-Catholicism plot myth was a theory about Protestantism that happened to involve Jesuits and Freemasons. The conspiracy theory was an overreaction to the presence of something the rationalists saw as a hidden enemy in their midst. There was an attempt at reunification with Catholicism, and some Protestants did work in secret to further this goal. For those who opposed reunification, worrying about who could be involved with this project would be understandable. That worry could have led some to interpret ambiguous data as evidence of involvement, inspiring false accusations that gave the impression of a vast plot. Detecting a vast plot would naturally motivate further countermeasures, which would cause more false positives and inspire further countermeasures.

Freemasonry, and particularly the Strict Observance, had become worryingly ambiguous after its legendary history had been falsified (Luckert 1993). Protestant opponents of the unification plan, once they had begun to suspect other Protestants of involvement, interpreted this ambiguity as evidence of the threat they were already searching for. With regards to its causes, this conspiracy

[79] Reformed theologian Jacques Bernard (1658-1718) claimed that it was "certain" that the Jesuits "know the sentiments of their Church better than all the other Doctors of the communion of Rome, & that one should trust what they say about it, rather than what is said by a small number of Jansenists, who have abandoned the sentiments of the Doctors of their Communion, but still want to make us believe that they are attached to it" ([Bernard] 1687: 368-370).

theory could therefore have less in common with earlier conspiracy theories about Jesuits than with contemporary Illuminati-related paranoia, as discussed in subchapter 2.1.8. on the popularity of the Illuminati complot myth in Germany.

3. Conclusions

In summary, these results show that the conspiracy theory of the French Revolution was less irrational than commonly assumed. It was based on sources from within the revolutionary camp, and these sources appeared to confirm that a Masonic conspiracy involving the Illuminati had caused the Revolution. Despite its factual inaccuracy, these results don't support using particular theories or methods to account for the origin and popularity of the conspiracy theory. Because of its importance to the historiography of conspiracy theories and its use as an archetype in literature about conspiracy theories, questioning earlier assumptions about its causes also motivates re-examining earlier conclusions about conspiracy theories as a category.

Because of the unreliability of those sources, however, these results also show that Freemasonry and the Illuminati had less influence than some researchers have argued. Neither Nicolas Bonneville or Mirabeau are likely to have been members of the Illuminati, and Bonneville's assertions about the ideological content of Freemasonry was most likely unrelated to any version of Freemasonry found in France before the Revolution.

3.1. Research Questions

Are Nicolas Bonneville's writings proof of Masonic or Illuminati influence on the French Revolution?

Bonneville's writings appear to provide support for conspiracy theories about the French Revolution. There are explicit claims and clear implications that the Illuminati was connected to the Cercle social, and that the Cercle social made the Revolution happen as a result of Masonic secrets. However, a close reading makes it obvious that Bonneville is an extremely unreliable source. He intentionally misled his readers, creating the impression that a secretive Masonic group had caused the Revolution.

There is no evidence that Bonneville had anything to do with French Freemasonry, and his belief that the Grand Orient de France was controlled by Jesuits makes it very unlikely that he was a member of the GODF. He claimed to have been initiated in England, and his writings don't appear to contradict this.

A mysterious group known as the Cercle social was particularly important to Bonneville's story. Allegedly, the Cercle social kick-started the French Revolution and had access to ancient Masonic secrets. The Cercle founded a group called the Friends of the Truth to spread revolutionary ideology

internationally, especially through Masonic lodges. Based on various lies and inconsistencies, it seems clear that the Cercle social never existed except as a pseudonym for Bonneville himself.

Bonneville strongly and publicly implied that the Cercle social was connected to the Illuminati. Even without conclusive evidence to either confirm or deny Bonneville's contact with the Illuminati before the Revolution, there are reasons to be skeptical. Considering his general dishonesty, his statements are insufficient without corroboration. An early speech by the abbé Fauchet could indicate that both he and Bonneville were too badly informed about the Illuminati to have been members.

Counterrevolutionaries misidentified the Cercle social as the very real Masonic lodge named Contrat social, which accidentally made Bonneville's claims appear more credible. At the same time, this and other errors hampered the search for evidence of revolutionary subversion and inspired angry denials from those falsely accused. The result was a desperate search for evidence of a conspiracy that nobody had even tried to hide. Bonneville sought out attention, but the spotlight ended up pointing at others.

Why did the abbé Barruel come to believe that the French Revolution was a Masonic Conspiracy?

The examination of different parts of Barruel's conspiracy theory illustrates the risk of distortion when this 20th century concept is projected onto earlier texts. His style of writing and his choice of subject both create a different impression today, after becoming indissolubly associated with irrationality and factual inaccuracy. Barruel's repeated use of the word "conspiracy" obscures the relatively mundane nature of many accusations made in the *Memoirs*.

Even though the conspiracy theory was entirely inaccurate and contained astonishing claims, its success was primarily caused by the amount of evidence that appeared to support it's fundamental narrative. While Bonneville's claims about Freemasonry and the Revolution are extremely unreliable, they are probably the most important reason why the conspiracy theory of the Revolution became so prevalent. Various rumours pre-dated Bonneville's disinformation campaign, but his writings appeared to confirm them. His writings about Freemasons and the Illuminati appeared to prove that both caused the Revolution.

Bonneville also contributed to the conspiracy theory through the Friends of the Truth. Although the revolutionary threat was overblown by German counterrevolutionaries, something was happening under the surface. Bonneville's writings deceptively created the impression of a vast international movement. Beginning the search for infiltrators was clearly justified, regardless of its eventual fate as an irrational witch hunt.

Why did Bonneville believe that Freemasonry had been taken over by Jesuits?

Bonneville wrote much about his Jesuit infiltration theory, but the evidence he provided does little to explain why he found it so convincing. Although his autobiography is ambiguous, it seems clear that his mental state was a contributing factor. He described himself as paranoid, and wrote that his behaviour made him appear sick. After being excluded from Freemasonry, apparently because of his suspicions, he wrote his 1788 book alleging that Jesuits had infiltrated and taken over the lodges.

Bonneville's interpretation was strongly influenced by his earlier beliefs about Catholicism. He appears to have experienced disillusionment following a conversion experience, and he later saw that conversion as the result of something sinister and deceptive. His later fears that Freemasonry could be used to secretly brainwash initiates were probably inspired by this retrospective perception of this experience.

Bonneville's writings from 1788 and 1791 indicate that he was attracted to Freemasonry because of its legendary history, and because he saw it as protection from what frightened him about Catholicism. In retrospect, he wrote that he had hoped Freemasonry would prevent religious violence and blind faith. When he began to doubt the veracity of Masonic legends, he instead projected his fear of the Catholic Church onto Freemasonry. In France, criticism of the Church in general was often directed at the Jesuits in particular, which could explain why Bonneville was so focused on them.

3.2. Causality and Earlier Research

When trying to explain the conspiracy theory that Freemasons or the Illuminati planned the French Revolution, this thesis has focused on claims with either a factual basis or the appearance of credibility. Nicolas Bonneville provided much of the latter. Although I have also argued against using him as evidence of Masonic or Illuminati involvement in the Revolution, Bonneville's writings did make the conspiracy theory plausible to contemporaries. He actively worked to spread misinformation, and he was helped along by a perfect storm of coincidences. The strangeness is primarily a reflection Bonneville's behaviour, and the baffling circumstances around his activities. The resulting theory was inaccurate and implausible, but seemed to be confirmed by publicly available evidence. It was vitally important, but utterly misguided. It inspired useless countermeasures against non-existent revolutionaries, and provoked intense reactions from real and imaginary enemies. These traits explain its enduring impact, as well as its notoriety.

These results partly support Timothy Tackett's hypothesis that Jacobin conspiracy theorising was triggered by the discovery of actual conspiracies during the early years of the Revolution, and

that an identity crisis triggered by the collapse of ancien régime accounted for the difference between reality and paranoid fiction. Tackett considers these differences too significant to say that conspiracies caused the conspiracy theories that proliferated during the Reign of Terror. In my opinion, the prevalence of similar overreactions to hidden threats in other circumstances indicates that some level of irrationality might be considered normal. If the original threat was invisible, it's unsurprising that those at risk would continue to search for conspirators even with little or no evidence.

Several conspiracy theories discussed in this thesis follow the same pattern, and appear to be direct continuations of justified efforts to counteract real conspiracies. The Illuminati were a hidden enemy at one point, and their strategies triggered a state of hypervigilence that continued after the Illuminati had disappeared. Similarly, Bonneville's writings and activism inspired reasonable efforts to work against revolutionary propaganda imported from France. Another example can be seen in early reactions to the Rosicrucian manifestos; undercover Calvinist missionaries inspired 17th century Lutherans to "decode" obviously non-Calvinist texts for signs of hidden enemies.

3.3. Theoretical Reflections

The introductory chapter on theoretical frameworks discussed debates around definitions of the term conspiracy theory. As David Coady writes, the alternative definitions used by different researchers vary to the point that they can't be said to study the same thing. Without a common definition, these results can't be easily compared to the existing body of research. Some of the theories discussed here as examples of conspiracy theories might not be categorised as such according to certain definitions. Bonneville's Jesuit infiltration theory, for example, wouldn't be a conspiracy theory according to definitions that only include theories about the causes of events.

Although some definitions don't mention rationality or factual accuracy, conspiracy theories are still strongly associated with falsehood. Conspiracy theories are often studied in order to better understand various forms of misinformation. However, as can be seen from the examples discussed in this thesis, different conspiracy theories can't be said to resemble each other with regards to rationality and logical coherence. Even incorrect theories can vary wildly in terms of rationality. Even a single idea can be more or less rational if held at different times, since real conspiracies seem to have a tendency to trigger irrational conspiracy theories by way of countermeasures that outlive their usefulness.

Theories blaming Freemasons for the murder of Gustav III were inaccurate, but not irrational. The real conspirators were members of the Swedish aristocracy, but blaming nobles made no sense

to Frenchmen who knew nothing about Swedish politics. Although the Illuminati didn't do it, blaming them was understandable considering their confusing name and widespread suspicions that Freemasons were behind the murder. Freemasons weren't really behind the murder, but thinking otherwise was understandable if you believed Jacobins were behind both the murder and a plot to infiltrate Freemasonry. The Jacobins hadn't infiltrated any lodges, but thinking they had was understandable in light of pre-existing and widespread fears based on Bonneville's activities and writings. The Jacobins didn't murder the king either, but suspecting them was understandable considering how much the revolutionaries gained from his death.

This thesis has argued that some types of false accusations that can be called conspiracy theories probably have the same causes. Accusations of regicidal and rebellious conspiracies can be used to turn rulers against an opponent, and similar accusations can be found throughout history because they benefit the accuser. Efforts to counteract real conspiracies can escalate past the point of rationality, which could be caused by the same psychological factors. In other words, there are patterns within the conspiracy theory category. Depending on which conspiracy theories are compared, this might give the impression that the category as a whole has consistent features.

Falsely claiming that the Illuminati-Freemasons were behind some random event, like the assassination of a king, is a classical example of a conspiracy theory. Automatically rejecting it as false would result in a factually accurate conclusion. This might have something to do with the widespread acceptance of conspiracy theory theory despite its serious flaws.

Even without a common definition, we all know what a conspiracy theory is. We can identify one almost immediately, and we can reject it as false by simply recognising it as a conspiracy theory. Even though no one has been able to define conspiracy theory in a way that could actually be used to separate fact from fiction with such surgical precision, we get it right most of the time. Because our ability to consistently detect and reject conspiracy theories seems to confirm the validity of the concept, this success rate might be the driving force behind the continuous search for a functioning definition.

Despite the high success rate of the "I know it when I see it" method, the lack of a definition that can be used to identify false and irrational conspiracy theories remains a problem, as exemplified by supposed parallels between conspiracy theories about the Illuminati and the Huguenots. French Protestants in the 16th century were accused of propagating heresy through illegal and secretive activities, and the Illuminati were accused of secretly and illegally spreading skepticism towards both throne and altar. Both groups really did do illegal things, which made secrecy a necessity. Identifying one of these accusations as a conspiracy theory and rejecting it as unfounded on that basis alone decreases our understanding of the accusation and its causes. At the same time, accepting an

unwarranted conclusion as accurate appears to validate the assumptions that inspired it. We've identified something as a conspiracy theory and we have rejected it as unfounded, thereby confirming that conspiracy theories are easily recognised and consistently unfounded.

Even though the pattern of false claims with certain recurring features seems to confirm that conspiracy theories are a distinct type of belief, there are other possible explanations. As mentioned in the introduction, the Illuminati complot thesis was used by Richard Hofstadter to exemplify the "paranoid style" in one of the most influential texts written about conspiracy theories. Considering its prominent role in the literature, it does not seem unreasonable to suspect that the Illuminati complot thesis is such a stereotypical example of a conspiracy theory because the term "conspiracy theory" was defined using this conspiracy theory as a model. The explanation for our high success rate could simply be that we repeatedly stumble over the same theory.

3.3.1. In Conclusion, Everything is Actually Connected

Based on his analysis of different conspiracy theories, Julien Giry developed a list of distinguishing features and suggested the "catch-all conspiracy theory" as a new category (Giry 2015: 36). The tendency to mix different conspiracy theories together into a catch-all theory is one of the traits found in all five examples Giry studied. These revolved around either the Knights Templar, Jesuits, Illuminati, Freemasons or Jews (Giry 2015: 30). However, these conspiracy theories were never really separate, which makes Giry's observation questionable. Bonneville included the Templars, Illuminati and Freemasonry in his own idealised conspiracy theory of the Revolution. He also believed that Jesuits had infiltrated Freemasonry, as did a number of his contemporaries. The amalgamation of these four groups can easily be found in the source material used by conspiracy theorists. Bonneville's own beliefs about Freemasonry included everyone on Giry's list except Jews. His writings predated Lefranc and Barruel, who are both considered pioneers of anti-Masonic conspiracy theories. Both of them also used Bonneville's writings to support their theories.

Although Bonneville did not claim that Jews were involved in any way, Jews were accused of complicity almost immediately after the Revolution (Oberhauser 2020: 563). This makes it difficult to accept Giry's conclusion that mixing older and disparate theories together is a distinguishing feature of conspiracy theories. The amalgamation is only a few years younger than the original version, and Jews are the only group that was actually added to the story later. The Templars, Jesuits, Freemasons and the Illuminati were there from the beginning. Giry's five examples are really only one or two.

Describing all conspiracy theories by describing different facets of the same theory would obviously be questionable, and it seems unlikely that Giry intended to do this. It seems probable that these examples were selected because of how easily recognisable they are as classical conspiracy theories. Because of their shared history, it seems unlikely that this is purely coincidental.

The complexity of this one conspiracy narrative could have created the illusion of a pattern. Various groups were included in this conspiracy theory from the beginning, and they were accused of colluding to cause the French Revolution. Despite only being a single example, the fact that multiple groups faced such similar accusations appears to confirm that conspiracy theories are their own type of theory, a recurring phenomenon with predictably absurd traits and qualities. This would explain why our intuitive ability to recognise false conspiracy theories can't be converted into an acceptable definition. There is a pattern, but it can't be used to accurately identify, assess or explain conspiracy theories outside of this particular family tree.

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