

Jewish conspiracies: a simple explanation for complex issues

The Demons of Anti-Semitism



MIROSŁAW KOFTA

Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw
member of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Psychology, Warsaw
Polish Academy of Sciences
kofta@psych.uw.edu.pl

Prof. Mirosław Kofta studies the psychology of intergroup relations and examines the mechanisms of stereotypes and prejudices



MICHAŁ BILEWICZ

Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw
Robert B. Zajonc Institute of Social Studies
michalbilewicz@gmail.com

Dr Michael Bilewicz is a social psychologist who directs the UW Center for Research on Prejudice

To explicate their present problems, groups experiencing difficulties and failures may develop conspiracy theories about clandestine activities by some ethnic group or sinister political forces

Google search statistics for Poland reveal a surprising regularity: whenever queries for information pertaining to some crisis become more frequent, so do queries for information about Jews. When Poles begin to consider the causes of an economic slowdown, what immediately springs to mind is that a conspiracy plotted by some foreign ethnic group must be to blame for worsening the country's economic situation. The belief in such a conspiracy of Jews does not appear to be waning in Poland, and each successive crisis or social tension revives these latent demons of anti-Semitism.

Perceiving reality through conspiracies

The Jewish conspiracy theory is one example of the conspiracy-based interpretation of social reality, whereby certain people show a tendency to perceive powerful yet hidden forces that threaten their world, the group to which they belong, or themselves as individuals. Such a tendency to think conspiratorially is partly due to relatively fixed personality

traits (such as a high level of authoritarianism, along with intolerance for ambiguity and a high need for cognitive closure), and partly due to personal experiences (such as life failures, or a sense of having no influence over one's own fate or the fate of the group). Conspiracy theories come in two types. One relates to individual events of a tragic or mysterious nature, which are perceived as the work of some covert pact among a certain group of people (like, for example, the conviction shared by more than 30% of US residents that the government is hiding evidence of aliens landing on Earth). The second type of conspiracy theory, which is much more deeply ingrained and therefore of a more dangerous nature, applies not to individual events but to the functioning of entire nations, ethnic minorities, followers of a particular religion, etc. Particularly noteworthy as an archetypal example of such a belief system is the Jewish conspiracy theory.

Who's behind it all

A key feature of a conspiracy theory is that it appears to identify a causal link, identifying a single "source of all evil" (a group whose secret, covert actions purposefully bring about negative social consequences: a rise in unemployment or economic downturn, a fueling of social conflicts or collapse of public morals, or even a loss of national sovereignty). Such a theory:

- provides a convenient, simple explanation of both group and individual difficulties and failures, offering us a sense of understanding of the social reality around us and insight into its essence ("I know who's really behind it all")
- this restores a sense of cognitive control over the social world (which therefore reduces uncertainty, lowers anxiety levels, and restores a sense of security;
- makes it possible for a conspiratorial group to be blamed "for every evil" (a phenomenon illustrated by our own research results, described below), and thereby removes from us and from the group of "victims" to which



Andrzej Polec

Although there are few Jews left in Poland, the belief in the existence of a "Jewish conspiracy" is still widespread

we belong the odium of responsibility for our failures (which likely helps restore both individual and collective self-esteem);

- promotes the taking of collective action aimed at eliminating the evil, providing a motivation as well as moral justification (the collective action motivated by conspiracy theories can take many forms: from political struggles against the "foreign" element and its exclusion, all the way to ethnic cleansing, pogroms, and even genocide).

Perhaps the foremost psychological mechanism intensifying the tendency to accept such a conspiratorial interpretation of social reality is the loss of personal control over the course of events. Recent research (Whitson and Galinsky, 2008) has shown that the experience of losing control makes lay people perceive relationships between events that are in fact completely unrelated to each other, a process that leads people to automatically and unknowingly accept conspiracy theories.

Research we have conducted together with Prof. Grzegorz Sędek indicates that people in Poland attribute the pursuit of power (over the world, financial organizations, or the media) to many ethnic groups (for example Germans, Americans, Jews, and Russians). However, our respondents saw the aspirations of Jews as being distinctively covert or secretive. Our other studies indicate that Polish respondents attribute to Jews very high levels of entitativity (which means they are seen as a highly unified group, jointly cooperating in the pursuit of their common goals) and essentialism (which means that the psychosocial characteristics of Jews are considered to be highly

inherent and stable). This all reinforces the Jewish conspiracy theory and makes it extremely difficult to uproot.

The dormant theory

A question arises: Does such a stereotype have real influence on the thinking and actions of people, or is it just a cultural epiphenomenon? Perhaps, as some researchers believe, the Jewish conspiracy theory is merely a historical echo of the old economic rivalry between Poles and Jews - of the ethnic conflicts that emerged in the 19th century, which saw the rise of modern Polish nationalism. On this view, such a theory is simply a holdover in people's memory that in fact gets "triggered" by the interviewer's questions themselves; it has no significant impact on the way people think, on their social and political attitudes or their motivations to act. The alternative view - which we support - assumes that the Jewish conspiracy theory generally lies "dormant," but in certain circumstances it "revives" and begins to exert a significant influence on people's attitudes (especially concerning other groups). In one study, performed during a time of parliamentary elections, we first met with young people studying at a vocational school and gauged their acceptance of the conspiratorial Jewish stereotype, and then four weeks later we measured these same individuals' attitudes towards and contact with people of Jewish origin. In this study, half of the participants were tested in the month of the elections, while the remaining were tested in the second month afterwards. Before the election, a conspiratorial stereotype turned out

Jewish conspiracies: a simple explanation for complex issues

to be a strong predictor of prejudice, but its influence declined sharply after the election (with the exception of accepting discrimination). This shows that the election-campaign climate (uncertainty as to who will win and take power) was conducive to the revival of the Jewish conspiracy theory, making it an important determinant of negative attitudes towards people of Jewish origin and associations with them. This theory lost its strength shortly after the elections, probably by reverting into a state of "dormancy." These and other results of our studies show that, even if Jewish conspiracy theory is an echo of the past, it is not an epiphenomenon; under the right circumstances it can exert a significant impact on people's way of thinking and attitudes, and presumably also on their social and political behavior.

Jews as scapegoats

One of the explanations suggested for the belief in Jewish conspiracies is the scapegoat theory, developed by social psychologists in the early 20th century. This theory assumed that intergroup hatred occurs as a result of projecting aggression onto a safe object: "I cannot attack my mother or strong employer, so I instead shift my aggression onto a minority group, the scapegoat." The scapegoat theory came under criticism in the 1940s - after the Holocaust experience, during which Nazi propaganda had presented the Jews not as helpless victims but as a well-organized and resourceful group adroitly mobilized against the Germans.

The American stereotype researcher Peter Glick introduced a significant adjustment in his newest formulation of the scapegoat theory. He argues that, for aggression to be shifted onto a scapegoat group, the latter must be seen in a very specific light. From studies of stereotypes, we know that the two main dimensions of stereotypical perceptions of groups are warmth (is the group oriented favorably towards us?) and competence (is the group able to harm us?); the best candidates for scapegoats will therefore be groups perceived as cold and competent, ones that threaten us with their efficiency and are at the same time set negatively against us. It is onto such groups that we transfer the responsibility for our own failures - especially those that we experience collectively. Responsibility trans-

ferred onto such groups seems to simplify the complex nature of our failures.

An image of the victims

Almost all the great hate crimes in history were preceded by efforts to portray the victims as being efficient, resourceful, conspiring, and threatening. In the 1930s, Nazi propaganda shaped the perception of the future victims of the Holocaust by highlighting the high positions held by certain assimilated German Jews (like Walther Rathenau), organizing sham trials, and using biological metaphors in satirical lampoons (such as that of an omnipotent octopus with tentacles everywhere). The Armenians in the Ottoman Empire era and the Tutsis in Rwanda were presented almost identically on the eve of the genocides against these groups.

In order to test the predictions of Peter Glick's theory, together with Ireneusz Kremlński we analyzed the results of a study conducted on a representative nationwide sample in Poland in 2002. In this study we measured people's sense of relative deprivation - that is, their assessment of to what extent the economic situation had deteriorated in comparison with previous years and to what extent the situation of the nation had worsened. We wanted to find out if people who suffer relative deprivation are more likely to believe in a Jewish conspiracy in the media, business, and politics. Our research showed that experiencing deterioration in one's own situation increases belief in Jewish conspiracy, and this in turn leads to a desire to discriminate against Jews - for example, denying them the right to buy land or establish businesses in Poland.

Not insignificant paranoia?

One may often encounter the opinion that conspiracy-based interpretations are merely the domain of the paranoid and that such views are now extremely rare in society. Yet in Poland, belief in a Jewish conspiracy still turns out to be widespread. In a survey we conducted in 2009, around 65% of Poles agreed with the statement that "Jews seek to expand their influence on the global economy," while 16% disagreed; 44% of Poles agreed to a lesser or greater extent with the statement "Jews seek world domination" (this includes 24% who strongly agreed), while 30% of Poles disagreed.



Anti-Semitism triggers aggressive actions, like the destruction of Jewish cultural monuments in Poland



Andrzej Polec

A high number of Poles see the actions of Jews as secretive: 64% of Poles believe that Jews operate covertly and behind the scenes, while 51% of Poles claim that Jews pursue their group goals in secret collusion.

The belief in a Jewish conspiracy strongly correlates with age (older people espouse such a belief much more frequently) as well as with authoritarianism (people who profess authoritarian views often also believe in a Jewish conspiracy). Religious individuals exhibit such conspiracy-based anti-Semitism more often than non-believers. The belief in a Jewish conspiracy in Poland is not associated with a respondent's particular political profile: people who considered themselves to have left wing or right wing views exhibited similar levels of anti-Semitism. The level of conspiracy-based anti-Semitism, however, does depend largely on a respondent's place of residence: we found the most people believing in Jewish conspiracy in the Lublin, Lesser Poland, Lodz and Podkarpacie regions, the least in the Opole, West Pomeranian and Greater Poland regions. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are thus mainly present in areas of Poland that were once home to large former Jewish communities, possibly attesting to the remarkable continued persistence of stereotypes that formed even before WWII.

Support for discrimination

Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have very serious consequences – they motivate the acceptance of various types of discrimination. Our 2009 research confirms that people who believe in a Jewish conspiracy strive to maintain the greatest possible distance from Jews; they would not vote for anyone who they discovered to be a Jew, they would be more willing to bar Jews from acquiring land and establishing a company in Poland, and they op-

pose the restitution of property left behind by Jews in Poland. In a quite recent experimental study we conducted on a 500-person sample of Internet users in 2011, we discovered that when we gave respondents the opportunity to donate money to a social objective, people who believe in a Jewish conspiracy were far less willing to support the reconstruction of Jewish monuments, but much more willing to donate to causes commemorating Poles.

Conspiracy-based anti-Semitism seems to be the primary mechanism responsible for respondents' support of discrimination against Jews, much more so than other forms of anti-Semitism (like religious anti-Judaism or secondary anti-Semitism, involving a reluctance to commemorate the Holocaust of the Jews). That is why it is worth examining in greater detail the psychological basis of this belief in a Jewish conspiracy, which seems to persist in Poland despite the changes that have been seen in the general attitudes of Poles towards Jews. ■

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