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Freemasonry, Secret Societies and the French Revolution

For centuries, conspiracy theorists have kept alive the idea that freemasons played a deliberate part in fomenting the French Revolution. Past and current academic scholarship takes the opposing view: that freemasons did not plot to overthrow the government. What the first point of view does not take into account is that masonry in France declined after the first years of the revolution.¹ What neither of these points of view take into account is that many of the same ideas which went into the ideologies and principles of freemasonry were instrumental in the ideology of the revolutionaries: the ideas of the Enlightenment. Additionally, freemasonry was not the only secret society² extant at the time in France. However, what is most certainly the case is that freemasonry did play a role in the revolution in that some of the revolutionaries were masons. Therefore, while not playing a direct part in instigating the French Revolution, freemasonry and individual masons did certainly contribute to the ideology that lay at the root of it. But what is possibly the most interesting aspect of this conspiracy theory, and conspiracy theories in general, is their longevity. The theories are perpetuated: once in writing, they are referred to over and over again, reaching fresh generations of readers who, in turn, incorporate them into works to be read by future generations. There are a variety of reasons why people

¹ J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2008 (1972)) 179

² To define the term secret society, and set parameters for its use within this paper, this paper will follow the guidelines set forward by Thomas Frost in the volume 1 preface to his 1876 work *The Secret Societies of the European Revolution 1776-1876*: "the adoption of an oath of secrecy and fidelity, an initiatory ceremony, and the use of symbols, pass-words, grips, &c." Thomas Frost, *The Secret Societies of the European Revolution 1776-1876* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876) xi

continue to believe in conspiracy theories; ultimately, it does not come down to just one reason, but a combination, depending on the time, place and agenda of the believer.

The two main works at the base of the accusation that the Masons, in combination with the Bavarian secret society the Illuminati and the philosophes, fostered the French Revolution, are the four-volume work by the Abbe Augustin Barruel (1741-1820), *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, and John Robison's (1739-1805) work, published in the same year as Barruel's (1789), *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*.³ In 1798, Robert Clifford, the translator of *Memoirs* into English, wrote his *Application of Barruel's Memoirs of Jacobinism, to the Secret Societies of Ireland and Great Britain*, in which he related Barruel's concepts, structures and conclusions specifically to Great Britain, narrowing the geographical focus of Barruel's work.⁴ Carrying Barruel's theory into the early 1900's, Nesta Helen Webster (1876-1960) contributes her 1924 work, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, which concludes that if there is (as she spends the work proving) one Power controlling the rest, it is either the Jews (the Jewish Power, as mainly the financiers behind the others), the Pan-German Power, or Illuminism (Freemasonry infiltrated by the Illuminati), and that power is behind not merely the French Revolution but a conspiracy to destroy "all patriotism, all national traditions and all Christian virtues."⁵ Una Birch (1876-1949) adds to this

³ The Abbe Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. Translated by Robert Clifford. 4 vols. (London: Published by T. Burton, sold by E. Booker, 1798); John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*, Third edition. (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1798). Hereafter referred to as "*Memoirs*" and "*Proofs*," respectively.

⁴ Robert Clifford (specified on the cover page as "The Translator of That Work"), *Application of Barruel's Memoirs of Jacobinism to the Secret Societies of Ireland and Great Britain*. (London: sold by E. Booker, 1798).

⁵ Nesta H. Webster, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*. (Palmdale: Omni Publications), 1924 (reprint undated) 402-403. Considering the links Webster draws between the Jews and the Pan-Germanists, one wonders what she made of the Holocaust. Possibly a plot to remove the middleman between the money and those who were using it?

list "the re-establishment of Paganism."⁶ However, Webster, in her earlier work on the French Revolution, gives four "great intrigues" as the cause of the Revolution:

- I. The intrigues of the Orleanists to change the dynasty of France
- II. The intrigue of the Subversives to destroy all religion all government
- III. The intrigue of Prussia to break the Franco-Austrian alliance
- IV. The intrigue of the English revolutionaries to overthrow the governments both of France and England.⁷

Only one of these intrigues can be attributed to secret societies, that of the Subersives. The others are correctly listed as intrigues and referred to throughout Webster's work as conspiracies. Thomas Frost argues that the Freemasons served to link the Templars of the fourteenth century with the Illuminati of the eighteenth,⁸ thus creating an additional trail and connection between all three secret societies, and reinforcing the conspiracy theory. Barruel, Robison, and Webster's work still continues to be cited and to influence the dialogue centering on secret societies, as well as the role they played (or not) in the French Revolution.⁹

Barruel pays close and detailed attention to the structure and logistics of the conspiracy, asserting that Masonic lodges and the habits of secrecy so integral to masonry are used as a cover for the ideas, beliefs and plans of the Illuminati, who secretly infiltrated the lodges. In this way, the conspirators were able, as Robison states, to disseminate religious and political ideas which

⁶ Una Birch, *Secret Societies and the French Revolution Together with Some Kindred Studies* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1911) 5

⁷ Nesta Webster. *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy* (Constable and Company Ltd., 1920) 34

⁸ Thomas Frost, *The Secret Societies*, 22

⁹ A thorough historiography of literature centering on conspiracy theories relating to the freemasons and other secret societies, especially in regard to their role in the French Revolution, is provided in chapter 6 (The Secret Societies and the French Revolution) of J.M. Roberts' *The Mythology of Secret Societies*. A more recent discussion of the changing attitude towards historical research into secret societies will be found in Jaap Kloosterman's Hidden Centres: The Rise and Fall of the Secret Societies, a paper delivered at the international conference 'Zentren und Peripherien der europäischen Wissensordnung vom 15. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert' (<http://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/publications/secrsoc-moscow2.pdf>)

they could not have circulated safely in the public arena.¹⁰ Thus, the vast majority of masons of the lower ranks were innocent and kept to the purposes for which masonry was formed, while some of the masons in the upper ranks were subverted to the purposes of Illuminism. Barruel's work, while enjoying an "initial popularity" immediately after the publication of the first volume, was subsequently critically and negatively received by his contemporaries.¹¹

Current academic scholarship maintains the negation of Barruel's and Robison's conspiracy theories by the critics of their day, given that aforementioned numerous inconsistencies and errors in Barruel's work, especially. However, despite the inconsistencies and mistakes in the *Memoirs*, Amos Hofman, in *Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opening: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy*, published in 1993, states that "the significance of Barruel's work should not be minimized...because his work appears to have been the first systematic attempt to discuss the role of conspiracy in a revolution."¹² Thomas Kaiser writes, "two centuries of scholarship has exploded the argument for a Revolutionary conspiracy, but it has not produced a satisfactory substitute account."¹³ While Kaiser wrote this statement in 1988, ten years later, Michael Sonenscher wrote that the question of the link between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, as one causal element of the revolution, is still open to discussion, indicating that there has not yet been a satisfactory accounting for the revolution.¹⁴ As an example of the malleability of theoretical explanations, he points to the effect of the recent revival of interest in

¹⁰ Robison, *Proofs*, 12

¹¹ Amos Hofman, "Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (The John Hopkins University Press) 27, No. 1 (1993): 30. This work provides an overview of the critical reception of Barruel's work, summarizing the points on which its main detractors base their opinion.

¹² Hofman, "Opinion," 32

¹³ Thomas E. Kaiser. "This Strange Offspring of *Philosophie*: Recent Historiographical Problems in Relating the Enlightenment to the French Revolution." *French Historical Studies*, 15, No. 3 (1988): 549.

¹⁴ Michael Sonenscher. "Enlightenment and Revolution." *The Journal of Modern History*, 70, No. 2 (1998): 371.

Jansenism on revolutionary historiography.¹⁵ Thus it is evident that although the while Barruel's claims, and the statements of other authors based on it, are not accepted in and of themselves, there is still academic and scholarly relevance to the work, especially given the many interpretations and explanations that can and have been given for the French Revolution.

Birch reinforces Barruel's connection between the Illuminati and the freemasons, in the person of Dr. Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830), the founder of the Illuminati, and with his creation of the Perfectibilists in France in 1776. Weishaupt was, she claims, the organizing mind needed to unite and lead the plethora of lodges, sects, societies and rites already existing in France, and create of them a "powerful political lever upon society."¹⁶ To do this, he instituted the Perfectibilists, the secret society which he intended should absorb all others.¹⁷ Webster adds the Jesuits to the mix: Weishaupt had been trained by Jesuits, and the two other founders of the Illuminati were also ex-Jesuits. Webster counters the belief that the Jesuits "were the secret directors of the sect" by stating that while "Illuminism was founded on the regime of the Jesuits... their religious doctrines were diametrically opposed."¹⁸ While Barruel, Robison and Webster argue that the Illuminati infiltrated masonic lodges and bent them to the purpose of Illuminism, Birch states that Weishaupt and the Illuminati continued those practices, and that Weishaupt formed, as well, a second secret society of his own, which rendered Illuminism and freemasonry nothing more than the lowest of its grades. Weishaupt passionately believed in the Rousseauian principles of the abolition of property, social authority and nationality, and that "human beings would return to that happy state in which they form but one family,"¹⁹ and felt he

¹⁵ Sonenscher, "Enlightenment and Revolution," *The Journal of Modern History* (The University of Chicago Press), 70, no. 2, (1998):371

¹⁶ Birch, *Secret Societies* 36

¹⁷ Birch, *Secret Societies* 38

¹⁸ Webster, *French Revolution* 20

¹⁹ Birch, *Secret Societies* 40-41

could achieve these principles, beginning in France, by uniting the secret societies—masonry, especially--and using them through his leadership of the Perfectibilists. It is certainly interesting that Maximillien Robespierre, member of the Committee for Public Safety, was also a follower of Rousseau, a point discussed more fully later.

Weishaupt's use of Perfectibilists as the name for his own secret society surely is no coincidence. Masonry has, as the basis for most of its main principles, the concept of the perfectibility of man. Liberte, egalite, fraternity--equality, liberty, brotherhood, the rallying cry of the Revolution--are three of the most important words and accompanying principles in masonry. Members are admitted for their merit and character and strive for their own dignity, honor and righteousness as they seek to create a world in which all could achieve these for themselves. The catchphrase "be the change you want to see in the world" is the perfect description of the masonic principles. Freemasonry aims to form men into good men, responsible and participatory citizens, with an awareness of their own higher levels (such as spirituality) and following higher pursuits (such as education and philosophy). Masonry teaches its members parliamentary procedure: the idea that each member has the duty and responsibility to vote in the election of officers, the setting of standards and disciplining of members who do not meet them, and to take care of their own. Governed by a constitution, the lodges function as schools for civic behavior, and has to have provided those revolutionaries who were members with the processes and procedures by which they brought Enlightenment ideas out of the abstract and into reality. Specifically, freemasonry, in effect, provided the masons on the Committee of Public Safety (Georges Couthon²⁰ and Georges Danton²¹), as well as among the revolutionaries

²⁰ R. R. Palmer *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989 (1941)) 13

²¹ William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons* (Richmond: Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co., Inc., 1957) http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/10,000_famous_freemasons/Volume_1_A_to_D.htm

(Jacques Hebert, Andre Chenier, Camille Desmoulins,²² and Jean-Paul Marat²³ and others) with a forum in which to circulate the new ideas of the Enlightenment, and the practical, logistical methods by which a new form of government could be created.

Masonry was not the only secret society in France at the time. Already discussed above are some of the secret societies then extant there, and in Europe. Interestingly, Robison includes reading groups on his list of dangerous societies, putting them in the same category as Freemasons and the Illuminati. These literary or reading societies abounded in France; Robespierre was an active member at Arras. While these societies did give "future revolutionists practice in expounding their sentiments and ideal ends," according to R. R. Palmer, they did not teach or provide experience in Parliamentary methods,²⁴ which freemasonry did and does.²⁵ However, the relevance of the literary societies is evident in that they were groups of individuals who read current works on philosophy, among other things. It is likely that the reading societies would have been recipients of Enlightenment ideas via the printed word. Additionally, literary societies served as discussion groups, in which ideas and theories were developed. They, as well as masonic lodges, in which the same activities went on, can be considered, as Robison does, hotbeds of revolutionary ideology.

One of the sources for published works contributing to the revolutionary feelings was the Society of Thirty. While not being a secret society, the Society of Thirty was responsible for some of the libelous publications antagonistic towards Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

Comprised of nobility, many of whom had the most ancient and noble ancestry in France, the

²² Sven G. Lunden, The Annihilation of Freemasonry, *The American Mercury*, vol LII, issue 206, February, 1941 <http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/Masonry/Essays/fascism.html>

²³ Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, "The Universal Republic of the Freemasons and the Culture of Mobility in the Enlightenment," *French Historical Studies* 49, no. 3 (2006) 423

²⁴ Palmer, *Twelve*, 7

²⁵ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 15

members of the Society of Thirty had been cut off by Marie Antoinette's handling of patronage and no longer had available to them many of the sources of income, derived from royal patronage, that had enabled them to maintain their positions. Daniel L. Wick writes that many members were also "enlightened," hostile to the ancient regime, and were among those directing the activities of the Patriot Party, resulting in the elections to the Estates General.²⁶ Georges Lefebvre, in *The Coming of the French Revolution*, calls this same group the Committee of Thirty, and also attributes to them the role of directing the events leading up to the Revolution, as opposed to the idea that a Masonic conspiracy was the guiding force.²⁷ However, he still grants to this society influence over the Revolution, reinforcing the idea that there was a guiding conspiracy responsible for it.

Frost devotes a chapter to the Napoleon-era Philadelphians, who began as a "quiet reading and debating society, much like the literary societies Robison discusses."²⁸ Under the direction of General Malet, the Philadelphians morphed not into a secret society but into a society with a secret goal: the end of the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte and the reinstatement of the monarchy. In this case, to keep the changed goals secret, the society was reorganized, invested with an air of mystery and an overlay of Illuminism.²⁹ While this society is not within the temporal parameters of this paper's thesis, it does provide another example of a conspiring society and how they operated.

Rosicrucianism existed in the form of a secret society extant some 150 years before the Revolution. Arthur Edward Waite states that the first appearance of the group was in 1623, with the appearance of a mysterious public manifesto. There was an outcry against the manifesto and

²⁶ Daniel L. Wick, "The Court Nobility and the French Revolution: The Example of the Society of Thirty." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 13 No. 3, Spring (1980) p 263-284

²⁷ Georges LeFebvre *The Coming of the French Revolution*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973 (1939) 53

²⁸ Frost, *Secret Societies*, 142

²⁹ Frost, *Secret Societies*, 143-144

the order behind it, with a period of high interest characterized by claims made by those wanting to be members, by those who said they were already members, by those denouncing the order and by those claiming the whole thing was a hoax. This period lasted approximately two years, at the end of which, according to Waite, the order was essentially forgotten.³⁰ However, Christopher McIntosh states that it re-appeared in 1760 as an organized body in southern Germany, and spread rapidly through central and Northern Europe.³¹ While McIntosh's work concentrates on Rosicrucianism in Germany, it is likely that—as with other philosophies and ideologies of the day—works on Rosicrucianism reached France, and were read and discussed in literary groups and masonic lodges.

In an interesting departure from the conspiracy theories which hold secret societies responsible for the French Revolution, Lucien de la Hodde states that none of the revolutions in France have been due to conspiracy. However, he wrote this in 1856, and specified the timeframe for this: the last sixty years: 1796-1856.³² He holds Paris herself responsible for the revolutions since 1796, and specifies those elements in Paris responsible for revolt, whimsically named and described: the youth of the schools ("schoolboys fond of noise, fracas and sudden events"³³), the imbeciles (hopeful men who, regardless of qualification, believe they should be governing the country; it is in this group that de la Hodde places the organizers and members of secret societies), the gypsies (those who "have a horror of ordinary life,"³⁴ which includes work), the sovereign people (the workmen of Paris, who "expects to make a fortune out of every

³⁰ Arthur Edward Waite *The Real History of the Rosicrucians Founded on their own manifestos and on facts and documents collected from the writings of initiated brethren* (London, G. Redway, 1887) 387-401

³¹ Christopher McIntosh *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason: eighteenth-century Rosicrucianism in Central Europe and its relationship to the Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992) ix

³² Lucien de la Hodde, *History of the Secret Societies and the Republican Party of France 1830-1848* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott and Co, 1856) 27

³³ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 28

³⁴ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 29

political tumult...impatient with the restraints of authority"³⁵), the fly-catchers (those who believe whatever they are told), the disaffected (those "injured in their fortune or affections"³⁶), the political refugees (abettors of revolt from other countries³⁷) and the bandits (those who use insurrection to line their own pockets).³⁸ None of these are secret societies, as he stated. The secret societies which de la Hodde does describe, including the Carbonari, did not exist until well past the timeframe of this paper, and therefore these societies does not enter into this discussion. Interestingly, de la Hodde claims that the antecedents of the Carbonari was in a masonic lodge (the Friends of Truth) formed in 1820, with the purely political aim of bringing down the Bourbon government.³⁹ A number of the other societies which de la Hodde discusses also used the masonic lodge structure.

Masonry contributed more than a structure for other societies to emulate. In addition to being instrumental in the publication and discussion of books and literature, masonic lodges instituted a system of correspondence, both to maintain contact with the farflung network of lodges across Europe, and to disseminate ideas and information, in an "explicit attempt to organize the European space of the Enlightenment."⁴⁰ Another goal of this Republic of Letters was to maintain commercial ties, especially those cemented by personal and professional friendships.⁴¹ The transnational book trade did not just serve the Republic of Letters, it revitalized it. English books in French sold in Germany and the work of French philosophes reached all over the European continent: "bound to one another through commercial exchanges, the booksellers of the eighteenth century sent the products of their presses coursing through the

³⁵ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 30

³⁶ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 31

³⁷ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 32

³⁸ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies* 27-33

³⁹ De la Hodde, *History of Secret Societies*, 34

⁴⁰ Beaurepaire, *Universal Republic of Freemasons*, 411

⁴¹ Beaurepaire, *Universal Republic of Freemasons* 418

circulatory system of the European book trade."⁴² These were some of the books read and debated in the masonic lodges and literary societies, including enlightenment ideology.

Birch claims that the dissemination of pamphlets and books espousing liberal ideas and originating in the rationalist presses of London, The Hague and Dublin was irregular and ultimately ineffective enough to be discounted as a contributory cause to the Revolution.⁴³

Contrarily, Margaret Jacob states that the Hague was the center of what she calls the Radical Enlightenment,⁴⁴ and that prior to 1750 the circulation of clandestine manuscripts "fed the flames of what became after mid-century a massive conflagration intended to destroy the Christian churches and their doctrines, as well as to invalidate the claims made to authority by established elites and absolutist institutions of government."⁴⁵ Jacob infers that there was no conspiracy necessary to accomplish these goals; all that was needed was for the ideas themselves to reach the people who could affect change. Under this category would fall those intellectuals who attended masonic lodges and the literary societies. Publishers and booksellers based in the Netherlands accomplished this through the dissemination of radical enlightenment literature.⁴⁶

Regarding the role of the masonic lodges in the Radical Enlightenment, Jacob is clear that they were "central to the history of European radicalism and [supplied] one of the links between English republicanism, that revolutionary legacy, and republican thought and schemes on the Continent."⁴⁷ She holds masonry directly responsible, thus, for the ideas which fomented the French Revolution, not as part of a deliberate conspiracy, as claim Barruel, Robison, Birch

⁴² Jeffrey Freedman *Books Without Borders in Enlightenment Europe: French Cosmopolitanism and Germany Literary Markets 2*

⁴³ Birch *Secret Societies*, 9

⁴⁴ Margaret Jacob *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, second edition (Lafayette: Cornerstone Book Publishers, 2006) xiv

⁴⁵ Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment* xvi

⁴⁶ Jacob is careful to clarify that most publishers and booksellers were not involved in the publication and sale of radical enlightenment literature *Radical Enlightenment*, xv

⁴⁷ Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment* 230

and Webster, but instead as a result of the new republicanism coming out of England, transmitted to France via the lodges and publishing networks. For those not in the masonic lodges, the literary societies could serve much the same purpose.

"Steeped in [these ideas,] the philosophy of the eighteenth-century,"⁴⁸ were the twelve members of the Committee for Public Safety, intellectuals all. Among these philosophies was that of Rousseau, of whom Robespierre was a follower. Philipp Blom describes Rousseau as a bitterly unhappy man, and his philosophy in neither entirely positive nor negative terms. Rousseau's philosophy at first glance suggested "a defense of freedom and human dignity, while actually laying the foundation for a deeply oppressive, intensely pessimistic view of life. The ideal society he advocated was based on ideological manipulation, political repression, and violence, and on a philosophy of guilt and paranoia that turned out to be ideally suited to justifying totalitarian regimes of all stripes."⁴⁹ Considering Robespierre's career as a revolutionary, especially one so prominent in the Committee for Public Safety, it is clear that his later actions—most particularly those based in paranoia—come very much from his adoption of Rousseauan philosophy. As mentioned earlier, it is significant to note that both Weishaupt and Robespierre were followers of Rousseau: both bent on the destruction of religion and governmental control, using deception and manipulation to achieve their ends. Blom further argues that it was the soft Enlightenment of Voltaire and Kant, with its worship of reason, which was so appealing to the revolutionaries, and that this provided them the basis for many of the changes instituted during the Revolution: the establishment of a new calendar, determinedly secular; the cult of the Supreme Being, a substitute for deity; the worship of Reason itself.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Palmer, *Twelve*, 18

⁴⁹ Philipp Blom *A Wicked Company: Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (New York: Basic Books, 2010) xvi

⁵⁰ Blom, *A Wicked Company*, 315-317

Gwynne Lewis gives a short summary of the various scholarly points of view towards the links between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; she states that it is "possible to isolate four important threads—religious, political, economic and social—that tie the Enlightenment to the successes and failures of the Revolution."⁵¹ Among these is the undeniable connection between enlightenment philosophies and the idea that moral regeneration must accompany any political revolution.⁵² It was this moral regeneration that the Committee was so bent on accomplishing. The reason and rationality espoused by the revolutionaries were the reason and rationality of the Enlightenment, the secular establishing itself in opposition to revealed religion. The breaking of the hold Catholicism had on the people of France was part of that moral regeneration, and turned out to be one of the most permanent changes resulting from the Revolution.

The Revolution resulted from a number of factors: the Enlightenment and republican ideas of the eighteenth-century, distributed and disseminated by publishers in and out of France as well as in France's masonic lodges and literary societies, among others. And yet it does seem that for every rational, social, political or cultural explanation for the Revolution, there are a multitude of conspiracy theories, attributing it to secret societies and the shadowy forces believed to lurk behind and within them.

Much depends on the temporal and geographical identity of the conspiracy theorist, both of which impacts and informs that theorist's agenda. Webster, an Englishwoman writing after the first World War, held the German republics responsible for the French Revolution. This is no surprise; the Germans had caused the war in which hundreds of thousands of Englishmen lost their lives. Just because a few years had passed, that was no reason to diminish the stature of this

⁵¹ Gwynne Lewis, "The French Revolution 1789-99" in *Revolutions and Revolutionary Traditions in the West 1560-1991* ed by David Parker (London: Routledge 2000) 89

⁵² Lewis "The French Revolution" 89-91

old enemy. Why not also hold them responsible for the French Revolution 150 years before? De La Hodde, a Frenchman, blames the first city of France for the ills following the Revolution, but he also mentions secret societies which whip up the populace. So while he give accountability to the French, he also distributes it among secret forces, both internal and external.

Michael Taylor, in his article "British Conservatism, the Illuminati, and the Conspiracy Theory of the French Revolution, 1797-1802,"⁵³ sets forth what he believes to lie at the root of the appeal and "success" of Barruel and Robison's theories, specifically in England at the time of the revolution. While some of his points are specific to England at the time, they are still applicable today. His first point is that traditional explanations were simply not powerful or satisfying enough to account for the upheaval that resulted from the French Revolution, which threw the continent of Europe into war and turmoil for decades.⁵⁴ Taylor's second explanatory element is the British perception of the revolution as "atheistic, republican and theory-driven," and its image one of blasphemy, sedition and ideological fanaticism.⁵⁵ His third point, most certainly a universal one, and definitely applicable today, is the need to portray the enemy as "an agent of evil, nefarious, and furtive."⁵⁶ It is not enough that the enemy be an enemy; he must be seen as larger than life, so that the efforts to resist him can be categorized as imperative and morally unambiguous. Fourth, as a "catch-all explanation," it simply made the whole event easier to understand, hearkening back to the idea of individuals influencing history.⁵⁷ This, also, is most definitely applicable to today's fascination with conspiracy theories, and this one in particular. It is difficult for people, scholars and non-academics alike, to conceive of such an

⁵³ Michael Taylor, "British Conservatism, the Illuminati, and the Conspiracy Theory of the French Revolution, 1797-1802," *Eighteenth-century Studies* 47, no. 3, (2014): 293-312

⁵⁴ Taylor, "British Conservatism", 298

⁵⁵ Taylor, "British Conservatism"299

⁵⁶ Taylor "British Conservatism"299

⁵⁷ Taylor "British Conservatism"299

important, pivotal and far-reaching event as a collection of causes. Much easier to see it as due to a conspiracy, to one cause, to one or two groups of men working on concert.

Birch reinforces this theory when she states that "it is hard to believe that the greatest experiment of modern history was engineered without [the cooperation of secret societies]."⁵⁸ She also suggests another reason for the fascination of conspiracies centered on secret societies and the French Revolution: if more research is done, the links can and will be found, individual facts will fall into place, and the whole picture will become clear.⁵⁹

It is the historian's oft-repeated cry: if only we had more information, we could be sure. We could know it all. The idea of discovering something no-one else has, of knowing--more importantly, of knowing without question, beyond doubt--is enticing and endlessly fascinating. And if there are no secrets, no secret societies, no conspiracies, what is there to know? Before there can be discoveries, there must be hidden facts and links. The hunger for knowledge and understanding cannot be discounted. There is one additional factor that none of these scholars have mentioned: there is great power in the knowing of secrets. To be the first scholar to expose the truth, to answer all the questions no other scholar has been able to answer, is part and parcel of that hunger for knowledge.

There is another possibility: the question of why people are so passionate about conspiracy theories could come down, after all, to a question of theodicy. If the ills of the world, the evil, the events of such impact and world-wide magnitude -- like the French Revolution--are attributed to a human cause, rather than a deistic one, then it keeps belief and faith in deity--any deity--whole. From the words with which secret societies are described -- atheistic, devil-worshipping, anti-clerical--it can be seen that they are believed to be set in opposition to

⁵⁸ Birch, *Secret Societies*, 4

⁵⁹ Birch, *Secret Societies*, 6

organized Christian religion. The implication is that they are of the Devil, and do the Devil's work. A battle cry of great power: we must unite to fight the devil and his earthly conspirators. The effect of this is to make secret societies into enemies of such evil power that their existence unifies disparate religious and social groups in support of efforts against them.

Conversely, putting a name to something that is seen as an alarmingly or frighteningly amorphous and vague collection of hazy currents lurking behind incomprehensible events and make sweeping changes, like the French Revolution and what resulted from it, easier to handle, thus cutting a shadowy enemy down to human size. We can accept a group of men, meeting in secrecy and darkness, manipulating people and events to achieve their sinister ends. It is easier and more comforting to accept that than to devote the time necessary to properly understand the economic, social, political, religious, philosophical and cultural currents which all contributed to the causes of the French Revolution.

Also to be taken into consideration is the basic human need to cast blame: scapegoats are a time-honored method for dealing with everything from natural disasters, to sweeping confusing and destructive events, to individual human actions. There is a deep human need to be able to point a finger and identify an individual or group of individuals to whom are assigned responsibility for the ills of the world. Webster has done it by including the Jews among the groups she claims are responsible for the changes in her English world.

Fear. Hunger for secret and hidden knowledge. The reduction of vague and amorphous dangers to manageable proportions. The need to hold an external force responsible for the evils that men do. The need to continue to vilify an old enemy. The impetus to find one enemy on which all things can be blamed. The idea that extraordinary events require extraordinary explanations. These are all reasons advanced here for the appeal of secret societies and the

conspiracy theories that involve them. It is clear that these motivations can operate singly or in concert. There is one other explanation, however, which may be the most visceral: rational explanations simply don't have the glamour of a good conspiracy theory. They are seductive, appealing, enticing. And we all do like glamour, don't we.

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