The importance of conspiracy theory in extremist ideology and propaganda

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Chapter 2: The Pre-History of the Grand Conspiracy Theory: Deception, Legitimacy, and Power

"...No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade."[1] - Arendt

Introduction

Before beginning a study of the Grand Conspiracy Theory one ought to review its prehistory, namely in ideas about the role of political conspiracy and deception in pre-modern times. The idea that a conspiracy can manipulate states or that a group can seize power using trickery is probably as old as government itself. This chapter will examine some pre-modern and early modern narratives (and the occasional real historical event) about conspiracies of usurpation via deception, and the usefulness of these narratives in some kinds of political propaganda. The bulk of this chapter deals with monarchical forms of government and the various kinds of palace conspiracies and political tricks that are the stuff of politics when there is a single sovereign decision maker that can be fooled, manipulated or replaced. The Grand Conspiracy theory, which will be the focus of subsequent chapters, takes these narratives of deception and manipulation that are quite possible at monarch-scale and applies them on an impossible national or even a world-scale. When studying conspiracy theories, it is important to recognize that they are not a totally recent phenomenon but grow out of a long literary and historical tradition of palace plots, contested monarchical succession, and propaganda accusing a ruler of being secretly illegitimate. The stories and political habits of peoples under monarchies did not totally disappear in the democratic age.

This chapter focuses on a few kinds of conspiracy-narratives that have continuity with elements of the Grand Conspiracy theory which we will examine in subsequent chapters. They are:

1. Stories about supposed kings being actually fakers or changelings who have tricked the people into following them like true kings.
2. Stories about monarchs being deceived and manipulated by groups of courtiers into doing their will, in effect making them, not the kings, the true exercisers of sovereign power.
3. Stories of monarchs transforming into tyrants, violating their oaths and obligations, doing actions which make their rule illegitimate, all while continuing the pretense that everything is normal.

[1] Arendt, Hannah, *Between Past and Future*, (Penguin Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle Edition, p. 223.

There is a section in this chapter that deals with the ancient Roman republic and its transition into a monarchy, even while keeping the trappings of a republic, which was a kind of public deception similar to the third type above.

The last part of this chapter describes how people have justified overthrowing and killing a tyrant, especially one whose activity would fall under the third kind of narrative described above.

Before we proceed to analyze these conspiracy theories, it is necessary to define what a "tyrant" is. The word "tyrant" comes from the Greeks word "τύραννος" - *turannos*. In ancient Greek this was probably originally a term for an absolute ruler,[2] such as its use in a hymn to Ares the god of war, praising him as the "stern governor [τύραννε] of the rebellious, leader of righteous men…" [3] The historian Herodotus (5th century BC) sometimes used the term as a synonym for king, but sometimes also used it in a negative sense, to mean someone who got his power unlawfully or who acted illegally as ruler.[4] The term was used in a purely negative way by Aristotle (4th century BC) who differentiated between a king, the leader of a state who should be obeyed, and a tyrant, the oppressor of a state who should be overthrown:

> "A king desires to be the guardian of his people, that those who have property may be secure in the possession of it, and that the people in general meet with no injury; but a tyrant, as has been often said, has no regard to the common good, except for his own advantage; his only object is pleasure, but a king's is virtue: what a tyrant therefore is ambitious of engrossing is wealth, but a king rather honour. The guards too of a king are citizens, a tyrant's foreigners."[5]

By the time the word reached modern English it had lost any hint of the earlier ambiguity seen in the ode to Mars and the histories of Herodotus. Today "tyranny" can mean either someone who seizes power unjustly and/or someone who exercises power unjustly, however he might have acquired this power,[6] either way, someone illegitimate and worthy of being overthrown. This is the sense the word is used here. While not all languages may have a special word for an illegitimate ruler who deserves to be overthrown, it is an idea that necessarily exists in any form of politics that does not simply endorse who ever appears to be in power.

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[2] Victor Parker, *A History of Ancient Greece*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014,) p. 109.

[3] Anonymous. *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Hugh G. Evelyn-White trans.,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), Perseus Digital Library. Available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0138%3Ahymn%3D8. Accessed April 5, 2019. Original Greek available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0137%3Ahymn%3D8. Accessed April 5, 2019.

[4] Arther Ferrill, "Herodotus on Tyranny," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte,* Bd. 27, H. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1978), p. 386.

[5] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government*, William Ellis trans., (London/New York: William Ellis / E. P. Dutton, 1928) Kindle Edition, pp 164-5, Location 2514.

[6] "Tyrant, n.1, 3", OED Online, March 2019, Oxford University Press. Accessed April 05, 2019.

Fooling the people about the king's legitimacy

People generally obey their "legitimate authority", whether that authority be a king, an elder, or a bureaucrat. Suspicion about possible deception, that the ruler is actually a tyrant, can play a critical role in de-legitimizing a king, a government, or a government official. If one suspects that one's ruler attained power through subverting the process of selecting a new authority, then the trappings of state are just camouflage for a usurper, and loyal subjects are dupes. While usurpation is usually accompanied by force, there is the possibility that someone can lever his way into power by fooling enough people, especially in a monarchy, becoming a usurper while people believe he is a new legitimate king. The 16th century French political philosopher Étienne de La Boette listed four ways that a people could become enslaved; they could be "driven by force or led into it by deception; conquered by foreign armies...or by political factions..."[7]

In the early 20th century Max Weber defined what became the three broad "inner justifications" for legitimate authority:

1. Authority grounded in tradition and the "eternal yesterday" which is "exercised by the patriarch and the patrimonial prince of yore."
2. Authority grounded in the personal charisma or special revelation given to an individual ruler, which is best exemplified in the prophet, warlord, party leader, or demagogue,
3. Authority grounded in "legality" that is "the belief in the validity of legal statutes and functional 'competence' based on rationally created *rules*."[8]

All three of these justifications could conceivably be faked. Fidelity to tradition can be fabricated (for example, when a hereditary monarchical succession is corrupted by a changeling or a bastard becoming king); the revelation of a "prophet" can be just made up; laws can be created by a corrupt legislature or government official, the civil servants given the authority to carry out the laws might have gotten their jobs through bribery or nepotism. Unless one believes in an obvious divine sanction that cannot be faked, how can one be sure that those who wield the state's sovereign power are actually legitimate?

The idea that people can be fooled into accepting an illegitimate ruler or accepting commands from an illegitimate source is not theoretical. Narratives making accusations of secret illegitimacy have been an important part of political propaganda. In extreme cases, in monarchies, propaganda accusing a reigning monarch of secret illegitimacy can be used to justify rebellion and usurpation. A prominent example of this is the testament of the Persian king Darius I (r. 522-486 BC) at Bisitun, which was carved in Babylonian, Elamite, and Old Persian on a rock face overlooking what was the main road between the eastern and Western parts of the Ancient Persian Empire. Copies of it were written in the chief languages of the empire and circulated through the provinces.[9] A papyrus fragment of the text written in Aramaic was

[7] Etienne de la Boetie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, Harry Kurz trans., (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2015), p. 54.
[8] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills trans., (Routlidge, 2009), p. 42.
[9] Amelie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, (Routledge, 2007). pp. 136, 142.

discovered in the ruins of an ancient Jewish colony in upper Egypt[10] near the empire's frontier. This monumental piece of political propaganda begins with claims of divine favor and election from the Persian god Auramazda, and a list of his subject peoples. It then launches into a narrative justifying his seizure of the throne, alleging that power had been usurped by a conspiracy of deceivers, and that Darius had to rise up against these usurpers:

> "…[the previous Persian King] Cambyses had a brother, by name Bardiya...then Cambyses killed that Bardiya; when Cambyses killed Bardiya, the people did not know that Bardiya had been killed; then, Cambyses went to Egypt. When Cambyses had gone to Egypt; then the people became disloyal… there was a man, a magus [Zoroastrian priest], Gaumata by name...He lied thus to the people: 'I am Bardiya, son of Cyrus, brother of Cambyses.' Then all the people became rebellious against Cambises...He seized the kingship...After that, Cambyses died his own death...There was no man, neither a Persian nor a Mede, nor anyone of our family, who could take the kingship away from that Gaumata the magus. The people were very much afraid of him (thinking that) he would kill many people who had known Bardiya previously… Ten days of the month Bagayadi were past (29 September 522), then I, with a few men, killed that Gaumata that magus, and his foremost followers. A fortress, by name Sikayahuvati, a district by name Nisaya, in Media, that is where I killed him. I took the kingship away from him; with the help of Auramazda. I became king; Aramazda granted me the kingship."[11]

The Greek historian Herodotus tells a similar story, but reports that the evil usurpation was instead done by two magi brothers, one of whom shared a name with and looked like the murdered rightful heir. Herodotus reports that this conspiracy was uncovered by the investigative work of Persian aristocrats and the testimony of the senior official who had killed the real heir.[12]

The narratives carved in Bishtun and related by Herodotus are not impossible, but they are difficult to believe.[13] If Darius and his fellow conspirators in fact killed the actual brother of the king and seized power, as seems likely, then the Bishtun inscription is deceptive political propaganda.[14] The fact that the story carved in the rock is far-fetched does not matter, it was deliberately spread by the most powerful state in the world. Doubting the truth of the story while Darius ruled was probably quite dangerous. Darius tried to make the whole empire believe that they had been dupes, obeying a tyrant instead of a true king, and that he and his companions had rescued them.

While the Bishtun inscription may be the most monumental example of the spreading of propaganda about a usurper secretly reigning while disguised as a legitimate king and justifying rebellion against him, there are many other lesser-known examples from history, especially in

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[10] R. Schmitt, "BISOTUN iii. Darius's Inscriptions," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, IV/3, pp. 299-305, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bisotun-iii (accessed on 25 April 2016).
[11] Kuhrt, p. 143.
[12] Herodotus, *The Histories*,A. D. Godley trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus Digital Library. Available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D3&force=y (accessed March 3, 2016).
[13] Richard N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, (Munich: Beck, 1984), p. 99.
[14] Frye, p. 101

the propaganda of foreign invaders supporting a pretender to justify their aggression. This propaganda is not always necessarily cynical. These narratives are not confined to propaganda, and also appears in fiction. There is a common trope in literature of royal heirs escaping peril, living incognito, and then one day returning and re-claiming the throne. Narratives like this were common in medieval and early modern Europe.[15]

The Bishtun inscription describes the apparent last member of a dynasty as being a secret usurper, but problems connected to a king's legitimacy usually appear when there is a new dynasty. What claim does a usurper or non-dynastic successor have to legitimacy, particularly if a monarchy is reliant on a hereditary claim to the throne? The ancient Egyptians avoided the impasse of a new dynasty or a usurper by claiming that a new Pharaoh was also the offspring of a God, just like the founders of every dynasty. A god had taken on the form of the husband of the new Pharaoh's mother and slept with her, and created a suitably divine royal heir. This kind of story was related in some detail in Egyptian writings, and left open the possibility that any woman could potentially give birth to a god-man, and in this way any new pharaoh could be given legitimacy.[16] Peoples without this kind of political-theological "escape mechanism" through a miraculous conception might be receptive to narratives describing the efforts to trick the people into abandoning their "true" king and accepting the legitimacy of interlopers.

In Portugal in the early modern era, for example, there was a concept of "Sebastianism" that points to the quasi-messianic return of the "true" Portuguese king Sebastian. Sebastian disappeared after the disastrous battle of Alcazarquivir in Morocco in 1578.[17] The throne eventually passed to the Spanish Habsburgs, but the idea of the hidden legitimate king Sebastian was used in propaganda against Spanish rule in Portugal.[18] In 1582 Philip II of Spain ransomed Sebastian's body from Morocco and had the remains buried in a monastery outside Lisbon to convince the Portuguese that Sebastian really was dead.[19] In 1598 a pretender appeared, claiming that he himself was Sebastian, and that he had been imprisoned in Venice by men working for Spain. After the pretender was captured by the Spanish authorities his supporters, led by a noble named Dom Joao de Castro, conducted a propaganda campaign supporting the pretender's cause. The Spanish authorities acted to head-off a brewing Portuguese rebellion in 1603 and executed the pretender. Even after the death of the pretender, his supporter Dom Joao continued to produce apocalyptic propaganda from exile in Paris proclaiming that Sebastian was still alive and that he would return, crush Islam, and rule the world.[20] Three fake papal bulls were circulated between 1598 and 1630 that name this pretender as the actual king Sebastian of Portugal.[21] There was another Portuguese rebellion

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[15] Maureen Perrie, "Trans-national Representations of Pretenders in 17th-Century Russian Revolts," in *From Mutual Observation to Propaganda War*, ed. Maureen Perrie, (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), p. 66.

[16] S. E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times: Ancient Monarchies and Empires, Volume 1,* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p 144.

[17] Bryan Givens, "Sebastianism in Theory and Practice in Early Modern Portugal," in *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World 1600-1800,* (University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 133

[18] Givens, p. 134

[19] Givens, p. 134

[20] Givens, pp. 135-137

[21] Givens, p. 137

against Spanish rule in 1637 that claimed that the rule of the Spanish king was illegitimate because the Portuguese still had a king, though the precise identity of that "Hidden King" was disputed. This myth of the hidden king Sebastian was apparently still a problem for the Portuguese king Joao IV after the restoration of an independent Portuguese throne.[22]

During Russia's 16th-17th century "Time of Troubles" after the end of the Rurik dynasty there was a succession of "false Dmitriis" - people claiming to be the legitimate heirs to the Rurikind throne. The Time of Troubles is one of the most important events in Russian history, and the first signs of the political events that would devastate Russia were rumors that the newly elected Tsar Boris Gudinov had sponsored the assassination of prince Dimitri Ivanovich, a son of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. There were also rumors that Gudinov and his sister (who had been the wife of the previous Tsar) had bribed and manipulated his way into being elected the new Tsar in 1598.[23] In 1600 a pretender appeared in Polish territory claiming to be Dmitri. He claimed that he had escaped an assassination attempt from Gudinov, fled abroad, and bided his time. Contemporaries in Poland and Italy noted holes in the story of this "king" Dmitri and the story's similarity to fictional stories about hidden kings and to other recent stories of supposedly "hidden" pretenders to the throne from Portugal and also Moldavia.[24] Nevertheless, this Dmitri received the support of the Polish crown. He invaded Russia at the head of a 4,000 man army, gained support in Russia, and seized the throne. During the campaign, propagandists in his service traveled throughout southwest Russia and Ukraine handing out leaflets and spreading the news that Dmitri was alive and re-claiming the throne from the usurper Gudinov.[25] The usurper managed to rule for almost a year.

In the end, the first false Dimitri's reign was ended by a conspiracy of Russian nobles, who led a mob into the Kremlin and murdered him, possibly on the pretext of defending him from a Polish plot.[26] One account of the murder of the first False Dimitri recorded by the Dutch ambassador Isaac Massa says that the palace coup was initiated by a piece of propaganda about a false usurper (in this case, it was true.) A very pious chancellor named Timofei Osipov was scheduled to swear allegiance to the new tsarina Maria Mniszech, who was Polish. According to Massa, Osipov was paid by the noble conspirators, took communion twice, received absolution, and prepared himself for death. When he entered the hall where he was to take the oath:

> "...he cried that he recognized Dmitry, not as the tsar's son, but as an unfrocked monk named Grishka Otrepiev who had won the throne of Moscow only through the agency of the Devil; he held this throne unjustly. As for the tsarina, he refused to swear her allegiance. She was a lady Jesuit, a pagan whose presence had profaned the sanctuaries of Moscow, and it was she who was the cause of the country's ruin."[27]

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[22] Givens, p. 141

[23] V. O. Kliuchevskii, *A History of Russia Volume Three,* C. J. Hogarth trans., (London/Edinburgh: J. M. Dent & Sons/ Ballantine Press, 1913), p. 22-3

[24] Perrie, p. 56.

[25] Daniel H. Shubin, *Tsars and Imposters: Russia's Time of Troubles***,** (USA: Algora Publishing, 2009), p. 89.

[26] Kliuchevskii, Vol. 3, p. 32.

[27] Isaac Massa, *A Short History of the Beginnings and Origins of These Present Wars in Moscow under the Reign of Various Sovereigns down to the Year 1610*, G. Edward Orchard trans., (University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 137.

Osipov was immediately killed, but the revolution rolled on and the pretender was dead by the end of the day.[28] [29]

These two examples from Portugal and Russia are among the most extreme cases in European history involving a story that the current ruler is in fact a deceptive usurper. But perhaps the most important and influential examples of a story of a deceptive usurper are found in Islamic history, among the Isma'ilis and some other Shi'a groups. The Isma'ilis are a sect of Islam who follow an Imam who claims descendent from the prophet's family, and also claims to be the only legitimate religious authority. The various Caliphs of Islam after Ali (Muhammad's cousin) were all considered usurpers by the Isma'ilis.[30] The Isma'ili Fatamid Caliphate (909-1171 AD) which at its peak controlled Egypt, Mecca, and much of Northern Africa, was a state founded on the idea that there was a true, legitimate Islamic dynasty that had been usurped by Sunni oppressors, but had now returned to reclaim the leadership of Islam. According to a Fatimid historian, an initial missionary slogan for Fatimid propagandists in Yemen was: "Rejoice, for the days of the oppressors are about to come to an end. The Restorer will come through whom God will restore the community of Muhammad. He is al-Mahdi and then Al-Mansur through whom God will cause religion to triumph."[31]

After the conquest of Egypt by armies who accepted the Isma'ili imam and the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty, the idea of the Fatimid Imam transformed from a hidden messianic leader who would return at the end of the world to a very real religious and political leader in charge of a major state.[32] The primary adversary of this leader was the "usurping" Sunni Abbasid caliphate that also claimed the leadership of Islam. The Fatimid armies or missionaries reached all through the Middle East, and they even briefly captured the Abbasid capital of Baghdad.

The Medieval Nizari Isma'ilis (known to western history as the Assassins) were a later form of Isma'ili Islam stemming from the Fatimids. The decisive break between the Nizari Isma'ilis and the Fatamids was a succession crisis. After the death of the Fatamid Caliph Al-

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[28] Ibid.

[29] This story bears a striking resemblance to part of Herodotus' narrative of king Darius' coup, mentioned earlier. In Herodotus' story a Persian noble named Perxaspes knew about the deceptive usurpation of the Persian throne because he himself had killed the true heir. However, he kept quiet and bid his time. When the cabal of tyrants, knowing that he was well-respected asked him to make an announcement before all the people that the fake king was the real king to buttress his support among the people, Perxaspes agreed. He went up onto a tower in front of a crowd and instead told the truth "saying that he had concealed it before, as it had not been safe for him to tell what had happened, but at the present time necessity forced him to reveal it..." He then jumped out of the tower and killed himself. By happy coincidence, Darius and the other plotters began their coup at the same time. see : Herodotus, The Histories, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D3&force=y (accessed March 3, 2016).

[30] Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community,* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p 63.

[31] Abū Ḥanīfah Nuʿmān ibn Muḥammad, *Founding the Fatimid State : The Rise of an Early Islamic Empire: an Annotated English Translation of Al-Qāḍī Al-Nuʿmān's Iftitāḥ Al-Daʿwa*, Hamid Haji trans., (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 21.

[32] "Isma'ilis," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, Gerhard Bowering ed., (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 265.

Mustansir in 1094 AD, a group of Isma'ilis recognized his heir Nizar instead of the heir recognized by the military establishment in Egypt.[33] While the Medieval Nizari Isma'ilis are mainly known in the West for their strategy of infiltration and targeted killing of their opponents "assassinations" (via Crusader accounts and popular fiction) their missionary/propaganda work was the main thing that got the attention of the wider Muslim world. The Fatimids and the Nizaris had sophisticated propaganda/missionary enterprises that spread their message of a divinely-appointed ruler descended from the Prophet.[34] These propaganda/missionary networks, called the *da'wa* worked secretly all through the Muslim world where rulers were not favorably disposed towards their doctrine.[35] The success of this propaganda before the conquest of Egypt may explain the ease with which the Fatimids took it.[36] According to the great Persian historian Juvaini, who was rabidly anti-Isma'ili but had unique access to the records at the Nizari headquarters at the famous castle of Alamut after its capture by the Mongols, the first leader of the Nizari Isma'ilis Hasan I Sabah "dispatched *da'is* (missionaries) in all directions and devoted the whole of his time to spreading his propaganda and perverting the short-sighted."[37] Juvaini relays that Hassan-I-Sabah claimed he captured the fortress of Alamut not by some daring assault but by infiltrating missionaries and spreading Isma'ili propaganda among the garrison until the castle's commander was just forced to leave.[38] A Sunni propaganda response to this force campaigning against the "illegitimate" Sunni caliph was to respond in kind with a story that the Isma'ili imams were false pretenders trying to fool Muslims. An anti-Fatimid manifesto published in 1011 AD claimed that the family claiming descent from the prophet were in fact descendants of an impostor.[39]

The deceived king becomes illegitimate

In his history of politics Samuel Edward Finer describes the two kinds of plots in a "Palace-polity." In addition to the kinds of to remove the ruler and replace him with somebody else or...pre-empt the succession"[40] like those described in the previous section, there was also the possibility of "...intrigue and conspiracy among the courtiers, the ruler's staff, the harem and the like, to get privileged access to the ruler's ear and if possible to shut out all over voices…" Extreme version of this kind of conspiracy take place when military leaders "maintain and even exalt the status of the legitimate monarch, while effectively controlling all his decisions."[41] The most obvious examples of this are in Mamluk Egypt and Japan under the Shogunate, when military leaders kept a pampered divinely-appointed ruler on the throne, while they actually

[33] Anthony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 48.
[34] Farhad Daftary, "FATIMIDS," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. IX, Fasc. 4, pp. 423-426, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fatimids (Accessed 3 May 2016).
[35] Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mosque of the Qarafa in Cairo" *Muqarnas,* Vol. 4 (1987), pp. 7-20, p. 13.
[36] Bloom, p. 16.
[37] 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Ghenghis Khan, The History of the World Conqueror*, J. A. Boyle trans., (Manchester University Press, UNESCO publishing, 1997), p. 671.
[38] Juvaini, p. 670.
[39] Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins, A Radical Sect in Islam,* (Basic Books, 2003), p. 32.
[40] Finer, Vol. 1, p. 42.
[41] Finer, Vol. 1, p. 71.

governed the land.[42] Probably no Mamluk Caliph or Japanese Emperor were deceived about his actual position. A more limited usurpation by deception is less obvious to the monarch. It involves the manipulation of the King by his courtiers and informants, often to mask their depredations or to use the king as a weapon against rival factions. This is a constant danger in a monarchy, when a single person wields immense power. The more power concentrated in a single individual, the easier this kind of conspiracy becomes, and the returns from manipulating him for one's own ends becomes higher as well.

The Biblical book of Esther, which was probably written in the 3rd or 4th centuries BC,[43] depicts the dangers of just this kind of palace conspiracy. It is probably the most widely-read narrative of this kind of palace conspiracy. According to the book of Esther, the high official Haman's anger against the Jews was kindled when the loyal Jewish official Mordecai refused to pay homage to him. Haman then persuaded the King to agree to a proclamation ordering the annihilation of the Jews, with the help of an offer to give the king 10,000 talents of silver.[44] This genocidal palace conspiracy of influence is countered by another conspiracy of influence: the plot by the king's wife Esther and her guardian Mordecai to influence the King. Esther craftily maneuvered and persuaded her husband to suddenly turn on Haman and have him executed, while issuing a counter-edict that allows the Jews to defend themselves.[45]

In the book of Esther the legitimacy of the Persian monarch is never questioned, despite his very close brush with condoning genocide for the sake of a favored official and perhaps 10,000 talents of silver. Indeed, the idea that a legitimate monarch could be deceived into making poor choices has been used as a way of explaining misrule without calling the legitimacy of the monarch into question. In Tsarist Russia the idea of "the Tsar is good but the Boyars (nobles) are bad" was a common trope used to express dissent at tyranny and misrule without calling the legitimacy of the divinely-sanctioned monarch into question. Using this line of reasoning, protesters could call on the Tsar to get rid of his bad advisors who were deceiving and manipulating him and bring in good advisors in order to restore proper rule.[46] An American military attache in Tsarist Russia once observed that the peasants who served in the Russian army had very poor opinions of their generals and quartermasters and rued their ill treatment and poor provisions, but comforted themselves with the thought: "If the Tsar only knew." The Tsar could not know everything, so the soldiers had to be patient and endure until someone could inform the Tsar about what his evil subordinates kept hidden from him.[47]

Occasionally in literature the sovereign could become such an unwitting servant of his non-sovereign advisors and subordinates that there he is de-facto usurped. The usurpers keep the king in place, but they conspire to manipulate him into doing their will by deceiving him — a usurpation by proxy. An excellent example of this kind of conspiracy narrative is an English

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[42] Finer, Vol. 1, p. 71.

[43] Sidnie Crawford, "Esther and Judith: Contrasts in Character," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, Leonard Jay Greenspoon, Sidnie White Crawford, T&T Clark eds., (A&C Black, 2003), p. 67.

[44] Esther 2:19-3:15 (English Standard Version).

[45] Esther 4-9:19 (English Standard Version).

[46] Maureen Perrie, "Indecent, Unseemly and Inappropriate Words: Popular Criticisms of the Tsar, 1648-50," in *Russische und Ukrainische Geschichte vom 16.-18. Jahrhundert,* (Harrassowitz Verlag, Germany, 2001,) p. 149.

[47] John S. Curtiss "The Peasant and the Army," in *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Wayne Vucinich ed., (Stanford University Press: 1968), p. 118.

book from 1572 titled *A treatise of tre*asons *against Q. Elizabeth, and the croune of England diuided into two partes* (A treatise of treasons against Queen Elizabeth, and the crown of England divided into two parts.) This staunchly pro-Roman Catholic, anti-Protestant text accused Queen Elizabeth's secretary of State William Cecil and her Lord Keeper of the Great Seal Nicholas Bacon of having usurped power through deception and manipulation of the Queen. The anonymous author stated that Bacon and Cecil "by false suggestions and crafty speeches, had so intruded themselves into her favor and credit, that with contempt and rejection of all the rest, she was wholly governed and ruled by them."[48] Their influence was so complete that Queen Elizabeth was "Queen but in name."[49] Their plots supposedly included encouraging Protestantism in the realm in order to spread chaos and allow them to pose as saviors[50] and also creating the false specter of a Roman Catholic conspiracy against the realm in order to justify the repression of the old nobility.[51] According to this text the conspirators persuaded the Queen to remain unmarried and eventually planned to make a relative of theirs the next king.[52]

This propaganda tract makes a specific point about the danger to nobles and senior courtiers to this kind of palace conspiracy. If a monarch has been captured by a conspiracy of influence, then he - the judge and arbiter of quarrels between aristocrats - would become a tool in the hands of a faction. In this case rebellion could be justified in the name of self-defense in addition to countering tyranny. This is a theme of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which dramatizes the fall of the English Plantagenet dynasty in 1397-99. In the play the Earl of Northumberland states the initial justification for rebellion:

"The king is not himself, but basely led
By flatterers; and what they will inform,
Merely in hate, 'gainst any of us all,
That will the king severely prosecute
'Gainst us, our lives, our children, and our heirs.[53]

Later in the play the rebel Henry Bolingbroke (soon to be Henry IV of England) lists the manipulation of the king perpetrated by two of the king's advisors as the chief reason for their execution after they fall into his hands:

"I will unfold some causes of your death.
You have misled a prince, a royal king,
A happy gentleman in blood and lineaments,
By you unhappy'd and disfigur'd clean:
...Myself, a prince by fortune of my birth,

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[48] John Leslie, (attributed), *A treatise of treasons against Q. Elizabeth, and the croune of England diuided into two partes,* (J Fowler, 1572), p. 31. (Text available online at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A21247.0001.001 . Transcript with modern spelling by Nina Green (2003) available at http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Leicester/Treatise_Treasons.pdf)
[49] Ibid. p. 29.
[50] Peter Lake "'The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I' Revisited (by its Victims) as a Conspiracy," in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe*, Barry Coward and Julian Swann eds., (Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 94.
[51] Ibid. p. 98.
[52] Ibid. p. 99-100.
[53] William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act II, Scene I, (London: John Bell, 1786), pp. 41-42.

Near to the king in blood; and near in love,
Till you did make him misinterpret me-..."[54]

About six years after this play was written it was used as propaganda to justify rebellion. The Earl of Essex ordered a performance of *Richard II* in London before his unsuccessful rebellion in 1601.[55] The play *Richard II* was suppressed by king Charles II in the 1680's.[56] Evidently, the idea that a king can lose legitimacy and be overthrown because he has become a tool of some faction did not sit well with some monarchs. Naturally, monarchs prefer to be unchallenged, and the implication that illegitimacy springs from courtiers rather than the king himself is small comfort if it can still result in overthrow.

The secret preparation of a tyranny

The danger that the "rightful" king could be corrupted and lose his right to rule does not emanate solely from deceptive courtiers. For political philosophers who believed in a "rational" or "moral" origin and purpose of kings, i.e. that the office exists in order to preserve order and peace, the weight of the question of legitimacy is on the monarch's actions rather than his origin. If a king acts justly, he is a legitimate king. If he acts tyrannically, then he is a tyrant regardless of his dynastic origin. Aristotle's definition of the difference between a monarch and a tyrant, discussed earlier in this chapter, is in harmony with this idea.

A standard way that a king might become illegitimate would be through the violation of oaths he made at his coronation or by using his power to break the laws of the land - assuming the laws of the land are not just dependent on the will of the king. In his political tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* the poet and philosopher Milton defended the execution of King Charles I in part by attacking the idea that a king is above the law and not bound by the oaths that he swore when he became king. Milton wrote that it "imports not whether foreign or native: For no Prince so native but professes to hold by Law; which when he himself overturns, breaking all the Covenants and Oaths that gave him title to his dignity, and were the bond and alliance between him and his people, what differs he from an outlandish King, or from an enemy?"[57] Milton draws evidence supporting this idea even from the "monarchical" past, quoting the Byzantine Emperor Leo III in "the Byzantine Laws" : "that the end of a King is for the general good, which he not performing is but the counterfeit of a King."[58]

The "Byzantine Laws" that Milton refers to is an edition of the Justinian Code, the compilation of Roman imperial law collected in the mid-6th century AD. Milton's use of a statement by a Byzantine emperor to justify revolution and attack the idea of the "divine right of kings" is incongruous on the surface, but it points to an important source of political tension and inspiration in the Western tradition. A central fact of the Western political tradition is that a large portion of its "classic" political age, Ancient Rome, was not a monarchy but a republic. The

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[54] Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act III, Scene I, p. 58.
[55] Ernst H. Kantorwitz, *The King's Two Bodies*, (Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 40.
[56] Kantorwitz, p. 41.
[57] John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, (1650) from the John Milton Reading Room, Dartmouth University, available at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/tenure/text.shtml (accessed May 3rd, 2016).
[58] Ibid.

source-civilization for most of Western law has regicide, the rejection of monarchy, and the establishment of a republic at the very center of its story. For much of Roman history identifying someone as an aspiring monarch would mark him for death,[59] as happened to Julius Caesar.

The Roman Republic eventually became an effective monarchy, but the symbols of republican rule remained, and the Roman Republic and the overthrow of the last "tyrannical" Roman king Lucius Tarquinius Superbus were not renounced. The Senate, as the body linking Rome to its founding as a republic, continued to be a key organ legitimating the rule of the Roman emperors well after the emperors were actually ruling as absolute monarchs. An example of this legitimation is the Law on Vespasian's Imperium (c. 70 AD) which has partially survived into modern times preserved on a bronze plaque. The document, which appears to be from the Roman Senate (though it may be a comitial statute) gives Vespasian constitutional authority to make treaties, hold sessions of the Senate, extend the borders of the city of Rome, and also exempts him from any "laws or plebiscites it has been recorded that the deified Augustus or Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus and Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus were not bound…"[60]

While the law enshrined the dictatorial power of Emperor Vespasian, it did not make him a king. It did not do away with the Republican constitutional traditions of elections or of Senate votes or do away with the veneer of law: "...it shall be lawful for him to hold a session of the Senate, to make a motion in it, to refer a matter to it, to propose decrees of the Senate by a motion and by calling for a vote by division…And that whatsoever persons seeking a magistracy, power, imperium, or change of anything he commends to the Roman Senate and people and to whomsoever he gives or promises his electoral support special consideration of them shall be taken in every election."[61]

In the opinion of the French political philosopher La Boette, during the "imperial" era of Rome's history these despots used the offices of a republic in order to deceive and coerce the people and reign as a kings:

> "They didn't even neglect, these Roman emperors, to assume generally the title of Tribune of the People, partly because this office was held sacred and inviolable and also because it had been founded for the defense and protection of the people and enjoyed the favor of the state. By this means they made sure that the populace would trust them completely, as if they merely used the title and did not abuse it."[62]

However, tyrannies do not only come about when republics degenerate. Some staunch monarchists can nevertheless believe that legitimate kings can morph into tyrants. The influential Jesuit political theorist Juan de Mariana (1536-1624) used the notoriously wicked emperor Nero as an example of a tyrant who could justly be killed, in addition to the example of the Egyptian pharaohs (an example drawn directly from Aristotle) and other examples from

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[59] *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought*, J. H. Burns ed., (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p 30.
[60] Allan Chester Johnson, Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton, Frank Card Bourne, *Ancient Roman Statutes*, (New Jersey: Lawbook Exchange: 2009), p 149.
[61] Ibid.
[62] La Boetie, p. 66.

ancient history and myth.[63] He pointed out a contemporary example as well, Henry III of France. According to Juan de Mariana Henry III had planned to make the Calvinist Henry of Navarre king after him, and when some nobles remonstrated with him he pretended to change his mind, but then had some of them assassinated. The French people, especially in Paris, rose in righteous revolt against this "tyrant."[64] De Mariana identified Henry III as a tyrant even though he was a rightful heir who had not seized the throne through illegitimate means. It was his grossly unjust actions as king that made him illegitimate, despite his continued claim to legitimacy. In this reading, those who had still believed him to be rightful king, and not a tyrant, were deceived.

In the West since the Middle Ages at least, the sovereign derives his authority from the law, which also determines the extent of his power.[65] A sovereign that violates this law deserved to be seen as illegitimate. In modern times, as the idea of the divine election of the sovereign has receded, the legal/"rational" basis for the establishment of sovereign power has grown, to the point that "legal positivism came to reduce legitimate domination to legal domination."[66] But law, process, and even customs are not completely foolproof and cannot defend themselves, especially from deception. If a tyrant has enough power to overwhelm the law or keep it functioning in name only then what can one legally do to stop him? Nothing, so one must turn to extra-legal methods, especially rebellion and assassination. However, this is not a simple answer. The possibility of deception also creates problems in determining when a ruler is a tyrant who deserves to be killed or when a rebellion is actually justified.

Justifying the tyrant's murder

Overthrowing an evil, illegitimate ruler has often been considered praiseworthy. Darius certainly did not try to hide it. Aristotle wrote that "great honour is due to him who kills not a thief, but a tyrant."[67] He even eulogizes tyrannical conspirators as honor-driven selfless warriors:

> "Those who conspire against a tyrant through love of glory and honour have a different motive in view from what I have already mentioned; for, like all others who embrace danger, they have only glory and honour in view, and think, not as some do, of the wealth and pomp they may acquire, but engage in this as they would in any other noble action, that they may be illustrious and distinguished, and destroy a tyrant, not to succeed in his tyranny, but to acquire renown. No doubt but the number of those who act upon this principle is small…"[68]

But who, exactly, can be considered a tyrant? Aristotle pointed to the Egyptian Pharaohs as tyrants[69] and also seemed to indicate that there were "many of them (demi-tyrants) to be met

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[63] Juan de Mariana, *The King and the Education of the King*, G. A. Moore trans., (Chevy Chase, the Country Dollar Press, 1948), p. 140.
[64] John Laures, *The Political Economy of Juan de Mariana*, (The Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 2008), p. 62.
[65] Jean-Marc Coicaud, *Legitimacy and Politics : A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility*, David Ames Curtis trans., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002), p. 19.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government*, p. 42, Kindle Location 792.
[68] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government,* p. 166, Kindle Location 2559.
[69] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government,* p. 170, Kindle Location 2613

with amongst the Persians."[70] But unlike many of the Greek tyrants of Aristotle's age, the Pharaohs claimed to be the legitimate rulers, descended from the gods, and the Persian emperors claimed divine endorsement. Christian churches have endorsed kings and rulers in the West, and the Church was jealous of its ability to declare kings legitimate or illegitimate. If a tyrant or a tyrant-in-waiting is being deceptive, then the ability of outside church authorities to detect and deal with this tyrant (perhaps before it is too late) is further called into question, unless one believes in the infallibility of church leaders.

In the Western tradition during the Middle Ages, the emphasis on oaths, law, and process was often maintained even in the face of apparent usurpations. This teaching was even incorporated into a Church council. One of the best-known examples of the condemnation of the murder of a potential usurper was occasioned by the murder in 1407 of Louis I, the Duke of Orleans by assassins in the pay of his cousin John of Valois. Louis I was the younger brother of the mad king Charles IV, and John of Valois and his faction justified his assassination by claiming that Louis I was an aspiring tyrant who was conspiring to usurp the throne from his brother.[71] This justification was elevated into the realms of theory and theology by Master Jean Petit of the University of Paris, who delivered an address to an audience of French nobles in 1408, which asserted "It is lawful for any subject, without any order or command, according to moral, divine, and natural law, to kill or cause to be killed a traitor and disloyal tyrant."[72] In 1415 the Roman Catholic Council of Constance directly contradicted Jean Petit's teaching, emphasizing the importance of procedure and law and attacking the use of underhand methods, even against a tyrant. The council even implied that treaties and oaths given to tyrants were binding:

> "...various propositions have been taught that are erroneous both in the faith and as regards to good morals, are scandalous in many ways and threaten to subvert the constitution and order of every state. Among these propositions this one has been reported: Any tyrant can and ought to be killed, licitly and meritoriously, by any of his vassals or subjects, even by means of plots and blandishments or flattery, notwithstanding any oath taken, or treaty made with the tyrant, and without waiting for a sentence or a command from any judge. This holy synod, wishing to oppose this error and to eradicate it completely, declares, decrees and defines, after mature deliberation, that this doctrine is erroneous in the faith and with regards to morals and it rejects and condemns the doctrine as heretical, scandalous and seditious and as leading the way through perjury to frauds, deceptions, lies, and betrayals."[73]

This Church's order to always await proper judgement and avoid secret plots requires a faith that institutions can still function to check or at least identify and condemn a usurper. But what if there are no legitimate authorities or judges left to do the condemning, or what if the usurper or usurper-in-waiting can fool or intimidate them? If the process is ineffective or even a

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[70] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government,* p. 169, Kindle Location 2601

[71] Franklin L. Ford, *Political Murder: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p 129.

[72] Ibid. p. 131-2.

[73] Frances Spilman, *The Councils of the Catholic Church: Nicea to Now*, (Lulu Inc, Raleigh, NC, 2015) p. 327.

tool of a clique or the tyrant then where can one turn who is suspicious that a usurpation has or is about to occur?

Over 180 years after the Council of Constance the aforementioned Jesuit political theorist Juan de Mariana (1536-1624) attacked the authority of the council of Constance. He wrote that it had never been endorsed by a Pope[74] and also Mariana made an argument justifying the murder of a tyrant without due process or a public hearing (NB, following Aristotle, Juan De Mariana wrote that even a legitimate king could lose his authority and become tyrannical because of bad behavior.)[75] After a section eulogizing Jacques Clement (the assassin of Henry III of France, whom De Mariana believed was a tyrant) De Mariana states that there should be procedure and some form of public appeal made to a tyrannical ruler to mend his ways, if this is possible. However, if procedures like these are impossible, then a private citizen should take matters into his own hands.

> "You would ask what must be done if the practicability of public assembly is taken away, as can often happen. There will be, truly, in my opinion at least, no change in the decision, since, when the state is crushed by the tyranny of the ruler and facility for assembly is taken away from the citizens, there would be no lack of desire to destroy the tyrant, to avenge the crimes of the rule, now plainly seen and intolerable, and to crush his destructive attempts. And so, if the sacred fatherland is falling in ruins and its fall is attracting the public enemies into the province, I think that he who bows to the public's prayers and tries to kill the tyrant will have acted in no wise unjustly…"[76]

Juan De Mariana's argument makes sense, otherwise a tyrant could make rebellion impossible for righteous men by engaging in extreme repression. However, there is ambiguity here: How repressive or deceptive must a tyrant or tyrant-in-waiting be before a private citizen can conclude that he must take matters into his own hands?

Juan De Mariana became infamous in England and France for justifying political murder during an age of assassinations.[77] The Scottish historian and Anglican Bishop Gilbert Burnet recorded his alarm in 1683 when his friend "brought me Mariana's Book of a Prince."[78] Burnet reports that this friend, the Earl of Essex, "...told me he knew the King intended to subdue his people as soon as he could… he believed that the Irish had undertaken to her [the Queen, the Roman Catholic Catherine of Braganza] to take possession of Ireland, and to drive the English out of it, and then to bring over an Army to assist the king in the conquest of England."[79] The Earl was soon afterwards condemned as a conspirator in the Rye House Plot against King Charles II and died while imprisoned in the Tower of London.[80]

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[74] Juan de Mariana, p. 150.
[75] Juan de Mariana, pp. 141-42.
[76] Juan de Mariana, p. 148.
[77] Helen Nader, review of the book "Juan de Mariana" by Alan Soons, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 1983), pp. 285-286.
[78] Quoted in Jonathan Scott, E*ngland's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context*, Cambridge, 2000 p. 164 / Original at British Library, MS 63,057, Transcript of Burnet's *History of His own Time*, Vol II p. 139.
[79] British Library manuscript MS 63,057, Transcript of Burnet's *History of His own Time*, Vol II p. 139.
[80] Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, *Tower of London*, Volume 2, (George Bell & Sons, London: 1902) pp. 75-77.

While the particulars of the conspiracy by the king of England to conquer England described by Burnet were false, the Rye House Plot that the Earl of Essex participated in was not an unjustified conspiracy against an innocent legitimate monarch, but was in fact a textbook example of a reaction against a deceptive tyrant-in-waiting that eventually culminated in the overthrow of James II (Charles II's brother and successor) in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In 1670 King Charles II had made a secret agreement with the French monarch to "declare himself catholic." In this "Secret treaty of Dover" Louis XIV of France agreed to give Charles II two million livres "to assist us (Charles II) in declaring ourself a Catholic" and an additional three million each year to pay the expenses of a new war against Holland.[81] The original text of the treaty also included the provision that the French king would "assist his Britannick Majesty with troops and money as often as there shall be need, in case the subjects of the said Lord the King shall not acquiesce with the said declaration, but rebel…"[82]

This treaty would match the requirements of a planned tyranny according to any protestant Englishman who was familiar with Juan De Mariana, Milton, or Aristotle: a ruler secretly plotting to bring in foreign troops in order to suppress a rebellion after he breaks his coronation oaths. (Of course, Juan De Mariana, being a staunch Roman Catholic, would probably have supported this plot and argued that Parliament was the usurper.) King Charles II and his successor James II continued to behave publicly as if there was never such a treaty for the king to bring in French troops to put down a rebellion and conspired to keep it secret. A version of the treaty without the most sensitive parts, that merely brought Britain into France's war against the Dutch, was publicly signed in late 1670.[83] Lord Shaftesbury, one of the ringleaders of the 1683 Rye House Plot, probably learned of the Secret Treaty of Dover in 1673.[84] England did go to war with the Netherlands, but the results of battle and the poor political fortunes of Charles II meant that he was never able to carry out the secret clauses of the treaty. During this time the attention of much of the English public was absorbed in a fictitious political narrative of a "Popish Plot" of Roman Catholics to murder King Charles II.[85] The widely propagandized and outlandish details of this supposed plot recommend it as the clearest example of the popularization of a conspiracy theory in English history. The anti-Roman Catholic frenzy whipped up in the late 17th century and the suspicion (which it turns out, was justified) that the king might be a Roman Catholic tyrant-in-waiting eventually led to the diminution of the power of the British monarch.

Conclusion: Towards the Grand Conspiracy Theory

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[81] John Dalrymple, *Memoirs Of Great Britain And Ireland: From The Dissolution of the last Parliament of Charles II until the Sea-battle of La Hogue*, Second Edition, (the Strand: W. Strahan and T Cadwell, 1771), p. 78.

[82] Dalrymple, p. 50.

[83] J. Kent Clark, *Whig's Progress: Tom Wharton Between Revolutions*, (Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2004), p. 243.

[84] Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 115-116.

[85] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 70.

This chapter examined three major categories of usurpation-via-deception narratives and provided historical examples of their use in propaganda and actual times when they actually happened. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, ideas about deceptive plots to secretly seize power, tyrants masquerading as legitimate leaders, or other conspiracies secretly manipulate politics have not disappeared in the modern age. They were such a staple of pre-modern propaganda, it is not surprising that they would be used by early modern propagandists. Of course, the stories were changed to reflect the realities of modern politics in countries without monarchies. Instead of distinct and occasional ideas of a conspiracy to usurp or manipulate the throne, the idea emerged of a grand conspiracy to usurp power and manipulate the whole people, and/or a group of tyrants conspiring to mask his tyranny with the trappings of a republic. Narratives about a conspiracy that influences the selection of rulers or influences the decisions of the rulers in an age of mass politics would require a more powerful network of conspirators to deceive the people and manipulate the system than palace intrigue. Theoretically, destroying legitimate succession in a monarchy passed on through primogeniture could require nothing more than an unfaithful queen or a nurse who switches two young children (a trope that often features in the propaganda of pretenders to the throne.) Deceiving and manipulating a monarch requires greater resources, but it is still very feasible. In a republic or in a polity where the legitimacy of a ruler or rulers depend not on family and succession but on the people's perception of the justness and efficacy of the government, the narratives that describe a usurpation via deception become more intricate, as imagined plots must be super powerful and reach into nearly every corner of society as they used to reach into every corner of the palace. Putative conspiracies must be credited with more reach and power to enable them to bring a palace conspiracy out of the palace and into the polis.

A conspiracy theory used by propagandists against the French Revolution described a successful plot of Freemasons to secretly take over France by overthrowing the King and instituting a republic under their control, and warned against their further plans to take over all of Europe in the same way. This became the first version of the Grand Conspiracy Theory, and its birth is the topic of the next chapter.