# The Conspiracy of Publicness

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**The concealing effect of the mass media is often seen as a conspiracy, in which everything is a plot to erase historical consciousness. In the 1960s William Burroughs, with his cut-up trilogy, created a literary mythology that managed to appropriate and manipulate the myths of the mass media, so that a sort of counter-publicness could emerge. Now that many subcultural myths have been co-opted by the media, Sven Lütticken argues it is time for a new Burroughs: the myths must once again be unmasked and deployed in a new form as an instrument of criticism against the conspiracy of publicness.**

*Reality is defined by the needs of the media. History is rewritten faster than it can happen. Culture is a weapon that's used against us.*
—Pere Ubu*, Woolie Bullie*

In his late writings, Guy Debord analysed contemporary society in terms of conspiracies. For this penchant he was severely criticised – surely conspiracy theory was a reactionary, outmoded phenomenon incompatible with a progressive, leftist analysis of the true forces (means of production, mass movements) that shape history? Debord conceded that this conception of history 'was a reactionary and ridiculous explanation in the nineteenth century, when so many forceful social movements agitated the masses.'[1] However, the intellectual dupes who presume that this is true for all times could not be more wrong, Debord argued. Today, the state itself has become conspiratorial; conspiring in favour of (rather than against) the established social order has become a booming business.[2] His claim that there were never conspiracies in favour of an existing order in the past is rather dubious, but Debord clearly wants to emphasise what is new. Essential for the new culture of conspiracy, in his view, is terrorism: 'This perfect democracy itself produces its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. It wants to be *judged by its enemies rather than by its results*.'[3]

One should bear in mind that Debord based his analysis on the terrorism of the 1970s, but his remarks obviously ring a bell in the current situation. Is George W. Bush not the very model of a politician who thrives on terrorism, on his enemies? The attacks of 9-11 were the result of a conspiracy against the (American) state, but the former contacts of the CIA with bin Laden soon led to wilder conspiracy theories: it was the White House or the CIA that was 'really' behind the attacks, or at least they had prior knowledge. On a more probable note, it was observed that the Bush administration immediately tried to implicate Iraq in the attacks, and went on to attack Iraq even though there was no proof. Apparently the attacks provided the perfect alibi to realize a dream dear to neo-conservatives in the Bush administration: the toppling of Saddam Hussein. The interests of the Bush clan and a number of Bush ministers and advisers in the oil industry have of course done much to fuel speculation about the 'true motives' behind this war, whose public legitimisation (which changed all the time, from 9-11 to weapons of mass destruction and the need to bring democracy to Iraq) was so flimsy and spurious. Perhaps Debord was exaggerating only mildly when he claimed that the society of advanced spectacle, which is seemingly so focused on making things public, is in fact based on a 'total victory of the secret'. [4]

Where does this leave the notion of the public sphere as constituted – above all – by the mass media? Every medium is based on selection, and in the case of mass media there are immense interests at stake in this selection process. It can well be argued that the mass media's most important function is *to hide and erase*; to keep things from being said, written, or shown; to prevent or pervert the formation of historical consciousness and thus of a public, collective memory of a non-trivial nature. With progres- sing concentration this mechanism becomes more dangerous, all the more so if the media tycoon is also a politician (Berlusconi). Groups that attempt to establish an alternative publicness in opposition to that of the mass media, and thus form 'counter-publics' revolving around 'counter-media', are of course not inherently good or saintly – or sane. They can be racist, fascist, or occult, and utterly devoid of control mechanisms. Those who participate in counter-publics should be aware of this, and not retreat into the self-congratulatory celebration of sexual, ethnic or lifestyle-related identities. [5] Counter-media should emphasise the dialectical relationship with mass media, their *Doppelgänger*. They should work at establishing public forums for voices that cannot function within the mass media, yet they should be wary of Habermasian idealism, of presuming that an ideal sphere of transparent communications and rational discussion can be realised. [6]

It would be foolish to suggest that we are living among the ruins of what was once a public sphere of blissful perfection. The early bourgeois public sphere too was built on exclusions and ideological smokescreens; what has become more obvious since the late nineteenth century is the way in which financial and political interests control the mechanism of exclusion and illusion. These are not merely imperfections that will be swept away by the progress of Enlightenment; they are integral to the system. But this should not lead to apathy and defeatism: it is possible to make a difference. The travesty that passes for publicness must be criticised and confronted with its aporias and taboos, without presuming that an ideal sphere of transparent, rational communication existed in the past or will exist in the future. Perhaps in a sense the mass media actually *are* such a perfectly functioning public sphere, but their rationality is mere instrumental reason, a *Zweckrationalität* in the service of certain interests. Following the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rather than Habermas, the perversion of reason and its reversal into myth must be criticised by focusing on what is subjected and damaged by this one-sided form of rationality. [7] Such an approach may use quite dubious material and exploit its latent potential. If instrumental reason becomes myth, artificial or second-degree mythologies can reveal the irrational logic of this culture.

### Memories Are Made of This

Since Debord's remarks on conspiracy in the 1980s, the lure of conspiracy theory has

become ever more pronounced. Activist Chip Berlet has condemned this booming production of conspiracy theories as a waste of time, as a placebo for a true leftist analysis of power structures. Conspiracies may exist, but their life span and influence are limited; they do not shape history. Rather than analysing how financial and political institutions and networks function, conspiracy theory posits the existence of a small group that controls everything, and manipulates events from sheer diabolical malice. It assumes that the (US) political system 'contains a democratic 'essence' blocked by outside forces', and that 'oppression is basically a matter of subjective actions by individuals or groups, not objective structures of power.' [8] This is indeed a classic characteristic of conspiracy theories (the Jews rule the world and oppress innocent people through their devious doings because they are inherently evil). Michael Barkun has noted that conspiracy theories proper imply a world in which nothing happens by accident, in which nothing is as it seems, and in which everything is connected. [9] Clearly, such assumptions lead to delusional totalising fictions rather than to anything compatible with a critical historical or social analysis. And yet, is there no place for conspiracies within such an analysis? Could one not speak of *structural conspiracies*, which need not be the intentional result of some sinister cabal? These structural conspiracies are *as-if conspiracies*, functioning (to a certain extent) *as if* they were conscious, actual conspiracies. They may also, at various points, involve real conspiracies, but these do not determine the overall structure. For instance: a presidential candidate and a group of financiers may conspire for their mutual benefit (the financiers will help the candidate in exchange for legislation that is in their interest), but such a conspiracy is an effect of a particular political system rather than a foreign intervention in it. Similarly, media moguls may at certain moments actively intervene to ensure that their newspapers and TV stations do not act against their interests, but in general a culture of conformity will ensure the same result. There is no actual conspiracy needed to keep, for example, a political activist or a certain subject matter outside most people's awareness if it is a pretty safe bet that there would be no large audience for such 'content'. Of course, this can be taken to mean that audiences have been conditioned by the media, and to some extent this is true. But, as Adorno noted in the late 1940s: 'Even the belief that people today react like insects and are degenerating into mere centers of socially conditioned reflexes, still belongs to the façade. Too well does it serve the purpose of those who prate about the New Mythos and the irrational powers of community', in other words: the Nazis. [10] Conformist, consumerist preferences by the public are not as passive as they seem; it takes an effort to accept what is enforced upon one self by the media, enjoy it and ask for more. This ensures that psychic energy that might otherwise be used for change, is used for the maintenance of the status quo: 'To become tranformed into an insect, man needs that energy which might possibly achieve his transformation into a man.' [11]

In his recent study, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun seems to presuppose that the mass media actually function as instruments of enlightenment, as neat Habermasian media whose status is undermined by the jungle that is the Internet: 'One effect of the Internet is to obscure the distinction between mainstream and fringe sources; another is to bind together individuals who hold fringe views. [...] The bizarre, eccentric, and obscene appear on the same screen that might display *The Times* of London or CNN.com.' [12] Barkun seems unwilling to ponder the question if *The Times*, as the highbrow part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, will ever act against its owner's interests and political agenda. And CNN, like other American corporate media, was remarkably averse to paying attention to widespread demonstrations and other forms of dissent against the war on Iraq, and not at all eager to investigate the reasons presented for the war and possible alternative motives. Are lunatic conspiracy theories on fringe websites (Al-Qaida was merely a pawn used by the secret rulers to impose the New World Order) not mirrored by an equally dubious 'conspiracy' of silence and selectiveness in the mass media? What about the CIA's conspiratorial activities with bin Laden in the past? Why the aversion to investigating the neo-conservatives' plan to wage war on Iraq, which existed even before 9-11? Were journalists afraid of discovering actual conspiracies, or at least social structures

teeming with conflicts of interest and hidden agendas? Did 9-11 not effectively work *as if* it was actually the result of a conspiracy perpetrated by the Bush administration and allied business / military interests, giving them unprecedented powers?

The transformation of history into an endless procession of nostalgic items is instructive of the ways in which the current mainstream media hide and erase. History becomes formatted as *I Love the 80s* and similar shows in which soap stars and TV presenters reminisce about trends and hypes. A decade is identified with certain clothes, hairstyles, TV shows and rock groups. All of these may or may not be important, but they become mere interchangeable material for the great nostalgia machine. Typical of the interviewees is a mixture of fondness and embarrassment: they often cannot believe that they once thought a certain hairstyle looked good, or were addicted to some silly TV show. This recycling of fashions and styles is the exact opposite of Benjaminian now-time: it is a no-time, inaccessible, quaint and nostalgic and fun for half an hour, but fundamentally dead. The executives, writers and celebs are part of a structure that creates a void in the place of historical consciousness. Here we see an as-if conspiracy in perfect working order: everything (rather than *everyone*) conspires to erase historical consciousness and replace it with interchangeable pop memories. The result in the case of George W. Bush's war on Iraq was, generally speaking, a bemused sense that history was repeating itself, that once again a Bush was waging war on Saddam, with some of the same personnel; for large parts of the American media this was at first – before the hangover kicked in – another kind of nostalgia show, a return to Operation Desert Storm. Any sense of the uncanny, deadly mechanism of repetition was blocked, as was an investigation of its underlying logic – whether structurally or actually conspiratorial. It is doubtful whether a contemporary version of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* could appear on CNN.com. [13] Attempts at establishing a counter-publicness must address the secrecy at the heart of mass media publicity – its conspiracy of silence and amnesia.

### Fictions and Myths

The thesis of the public sphere as a structural conspiracy highlights a fundamental conundrum: are conspiracies actual or fictional? Are they genuine conspiracies, or just the product of overactive imaginations? Oddly, conspiracy theorists themselves, who passionately believe in the reality of the conspiracies they 'expose', often refer to works of fiction as evidence. In his book, Michael Barkun investigates how right-wing conspiracy theories about the so-called 'New World Order' imposed by a sinister elite have since the late 1980s merged with the UFO subculture. There is a thriving cottage industry of theories about secret cabals of politicians and (Jewish) financiers undermining (American) democracy for their own seedy purposes, all the while keeping their knowledge of and contacts with aliens secret from the unsuspecting public – to prevent a panic, or because they have made some kind of seedy deal with the ETs. The latter might include permission for the aliens to use human beings for experimentation or other purposes, in exchange for extraterrestrial technology for the human elite. On the other hand, UFOs might be vessels with which the elite (the secret rulers of the world) plan to leave earth, leaving the rest of the population behind, exposed to imminent global disaster. Often these theorists freely use elements that were fictional in the first place – novels, stories and films that are considered to contain coded knowledge of conspiracies. In turn, their theories have also been influential on pop culture, in TV series like *The X-Files* and films such as *Independence Day* and *Men in Black* – the men in black being not the invention of the writers of the film or of the comic strip on which it is based, but an element of UFO folklore that has been around for decades. Of course, when elements from conspiracy theory move into mainstream spectacle, they are sanitised and treated as fictions, whereas they are very serious for the conspiracy theorists. On the other hand, the penetration of these elements into mass culture has increased the prestige of conspiracy theories. [14] Counter-media can be of a discursive and political nature, but they can also have an artistic character, although the artistic of course does not exclude the discursive (no art could

exist without the support of a specific discourse). In a literary or other artistic context, conspiracies could be treated as fictions or as ambiguous phenomena that cannot easily be called either fact or fiction. A poetics of conspiracy has been proposed by Hakim Bey, who suggests that the erosion of the distinction between factual and fictional conspiracies can be used for critical purposes. From an anarchist perspective, Bey argues for 'a non-authoritarian theory of conspiracy theory which neither denies it altogether nor elevates it to the status of an ideology.' [15] He notes that one cannot explain certain phenomena without recourse to conspiracy theories; in the terms used here, one could characterise the examples given by him as intentional conspiracies within wider structural (pseudo or as-if) conspiracies in the political and military domain. 'To take one example, anyone who denies the reality of conspiracy must face a difficult task indeed when attempting to explain away the activities of certain elements within Intelligence and the Republican Party in the USA over the last few decades.' Bey notes that a sophisticated conspiracy theory posits 'no single, all-powerful, over-riding cabal in charge of 'History'. That would indeed be a form of stupid paranoia, whether of the Left or the Right.' [16] Bey proposes to treat a conspiracy 'like an aesthetic construct, or a language-construct, and could be analysed like a text.' Bey refers to the *Illuminati* books by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, which use conspiracy theories concerning the Illuminati sect for the creation of an extravagant fiction. [17] Whereas the thesis of structural conspiracies does not presume an actual, intentional conspiracy, fictional conspiracy theory does just that. However, in this case the assumption that there is an actual conspiracy is *itself* part of a fiction. It is another type of 'as-if'conspiracy.

Going a little bit back in history, one could think of the works of a man whom one is not likely to encounter in nostalgia shows about the 1950s or 1960s: William S. Burroughs. In his cut-up trilogy from the 1960s, Burroughs created a 'mythology for the space age' which in many ways prefigures contemporary conspiracy theories of the type investigated by Barkun. [18] He used some of the impulses that propel conspiracy theories: his world is a paranoid universe of aliens and of elites in league with aliens, of deception and lies. Burroughs's use of the term 'mythology' deserves to be examined in some detail. In antiquity, 'mythos' came to stand for untrue stories, stories about gods and heroes that were believed by former, more gullible generations, but not by philosophical minds. A myth, then, is something recognised as a fiction by the person who calls it a myth, yet it is a special type of fiction – one that is believed in by people who do not recognise its status as a myth. Since romanticism, many writers and artists have longed for a 'return of myth', passionately wanting to believe in what had been exposed as a lie. [19] In the twentieth century, the term myth was increasingly used in a wider sense, referring not only to stories about gods or distant times. It has become common to criticise 'myths' that are perpetuated by the media or by a certain type of discourse; in an author such as Roland Barthes, 'myth' becomes all but synonymous with 'ideology'.

However, Burroughs uses not 'myth' but '*mythology*'. This term can refer to a body of myths or myth in general, and hence be more or less synonymous with 'myth' if the latter is used in a generic sense. This could be called 'first-degree mythology'. On the other hand, 'mythology' can also stand for a scholarly or scientific study and examination of 'myth'; one could call this *second-degree mythology*. Barthes called for the 'theft' of bourgeois mass-media myths in order to create a critical second-degree mythology – a 'true mythology'. [20] Burroughs thus chose a highly ambiguous term. He may have used it in the more common first sense and regarded himself as a myth-maker who would give the 'space age' its cosmological mythology, but this mythology was in fact a reworking of half-hidden readymade myths that were unacceptable to the mass media. Rather than steal bourgeois myths from *Paris-Match* or other major media, as Barthes advocated, Burroughs appropriated strange myths from the fringes and reworked them into a bizarre counter-mythology.

## The Reality Studio

With Burroughs, science-fiction becomes a provider of readymade myths for the avant-garde. During the 1950s, the science-fiction topics of space travel and alien civilisations had become – for many – a living reality: since World War II numerous UFO sightings received massive media coverage. Carl Gustav Jung concluded that UFOs had become a 'living myth'. [21] While also infiltrating the mass media as spectacular news, UFOs belonged to a subcultural group obsessed with plots and secrecy. For some years Burroughs was a member of the Scientology cult, founded by the sci-fi author L. Ron Hubbard, which jealously guarded the secret documents that detailed its space-opera cosmology. Hubbard restyled the spirit as 'thetan'; four quadrillion years ago the immortal, immaterial thetans became entrapped in time and matter through 'implants', and lost any sense of their true nature. Human beings 'host' thetans from other planets that were transported to earth ages ago by an evil ruler called Xenu. [22]

Like Hubbard, Burroughs was fundamentally a gnostic, and he too saw time and space as illusions in which mankind is trapped – in his view they are generated by language, itself conceived as an evil alien phenomenon. Whereas normal conspiracy authors try to outline their theory in an orderly, persuasive discourse (even though they often fail miserably), Burroughs considered language to be a virus and discursive reason to be a fatal outcome of this disease. Contrary to Debord, who sided with discourse and decried the commodity-images of spectacle (although not, generally speaking, images as such), Burroughs considered the introduction of language a fall from grace, and discursive reason to be a pest that had also corrupted images and reduced them to stereotypes. 'What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: *'the word*.' Alien Word *'the*.' '*The*' *word* of Alien Enemy imprisons '*thee*' in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open.' [23] But Burroughs' favourite metaphor for the illusory world people take for reality was film; so-called reality is a biological movie, implanted in the human mind. [24] For Burroughs, the mass media had little to do with a Habermasian public sphere; they were control mechanisms. As he noted concerning one of his favourite bogeymen, Henry Luce's media organisation: 'It's a control system. It has nothing to do with reporting. Time / Life / Fortune is some sort of police investigation.' [25]

In his cut-up novels *The Soft Machine, The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express*, Burroughs aimed to 'break down the police organisation of words and images' by using the cut-up technique – cutting though printed texts and reassembling them in order to create new literary montages. With his cut-ups and use of genres as science-fiction, Burroughs steals language and types of language, creating a literary of (post)modern myths that makes more sense of the post-war world than sociological analyses. In Burroughs's sci-fi mythology, the 'nova police' fights the nova mob, a bunch of human criminals in league with aliens who feed like parasites on the earth's resources, and in the end will blow up the used earth, creating a supernova. The aliens sometimes use humans as hosts or disguises; it is the task of the nova police to track them down as 'they move cross the wounded galaxies always a few years ahead of the Nova Heat'. [26] Meanwhile, the industrial-military-political elite collaborates in the hope of being allowed to leave earth before the big bang on board some spaceship. 'Collaborators with Insect People with Vegetable People. With any people anywhere who offer you a body forever,' as inspector Lee of the Nova Police – Burroughs' alter ego – rants, also exhorting the reader: 'With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly.' [27]

Burroughs creates confusion about the degree to which he is serious about the cosmic conspiracy hinted at obsessively in his works. That he used the term *mythology* suggests that he was concerned with creating something whose epistemological status was ambiguous. Burroughs' novels have an uncanny sense of urgency, but they would be of

little interest if they were merely attempts by some loon to convince us of the reality of an Insect Trust. His writing constantly deconstructs the status of his theories as theories; they are so 'writerly', so much entangled in language, undoing its conventions and codes, that they throw doubt on the possibility of any 'theory' fitting 'the facts'. A frequent contributor to the underground magazines of the 1960s and '70s, Burroughs could be used as a model – however dysfunctional and problematical – for artistic strategies of counter-publicness. Barthes called for a 'true mythology' that would steal and manipulate the myths of the mass media, which are themselves stolen and 'mythified' language; by contrast, Burroughs availed himself of alternative myths from a half-hidden subculture of pulp and cults.

However, these subcultural myths have by now become part of the mainstream in the sanitised form of TV shows and films such as *X-Files*, *Men in Black*, and *Independence Day* , while also proliferating on the fringes in the form of right wing / UFO conspiracy theories. The basis for this culture are the myths that Burroughs used, not his outrageous mythology; the raw material, not his reprocessing. Our conspiracy mythology is a first-degree mythology in need of creative theft. In a mythical mode, Burroughs analysed the military-industrial complex and the media by using material that was rejected by the mass media and kept out of the mainstream cultural memory. Now that these media have incorporated much of this material, they use it to create a general atmosphere of secrecy and conspiracy which is more titillating than illuminating; who needs journalistic investigation when you have *The X-Files*? This mass culture of conspiracy could use a new Burroughs, someone who once more cuts up these myths and turns them against the conspiracy of publicness that has absorbed them.

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## Footnotes

1. 'La conception policière de l'histoire était au XIXe siècle une explication réactionnaire, et ridicule, alors que tant de puissants mouvements sociaux agitaient les masses.' Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (1988), Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p. 82.
2. Ibid., pp. 99–100.
3. 'Cette démocratie si parfaite fabrique elle-même son inconcevable ennemi, le terrorisme. Elle veut, en effet, ***être jugée sur ses ennemis plutôt que sur ses résultats***.' Ibid., p. 40.
4. Ibid., p. 90.
5. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York, Zone Books, 2002. The 'public space' with which the art world is preoccupied is only in some cases part of the public sphere – for instance in the case of political demonstrations or other gatherings, or if a work of art manages to overcome the 'white noise' of the everyday urban experience. Generally speaking, art in galleries or museums is more public, that is: visible to an interested public rather than to random passers-by, and more intensely discussed. Of course, the specialist nature of this public is one of the reasons for attempts to break out of the white cube.
6. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1962), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1990. Habermas's strong analysis of the transformation of the public sphere by the rise of twentieth-century mass media is marred by his all too ideal image of the early bourgeois, 'literary' public sphere.
7. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (1947), Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1988.
8. Chip Berlet, 'Conspiracy Theory as a Waste of Time' (2000), www.squawk.ca.
9. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 3–4.
10. T.W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in: *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science IX* (1941), no. 1, pp. 47–48.
11. Ibid., p. 48.
12. Barkun, op. cit. (note 9), p. 20.
13. To prevent nostalgia from creeping in, one should note that Marx's essay was not exactly mainstream either. See Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in: Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels, *Studienausgabe Band IV: Geschichte und Politik 2* (ed. Iring Fetscher), Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1990, pp. 33–119.
14. Barkun, op. cit. (note 9), a.o. pp. 33–34.
15. Hakim Bey, 'The Ontological Status of Conspiracy Theory', www.hermetic.com.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Barry Miles, *William Burroughs: El hombre invisible*, London, Virgin Books, 2002, p. 126. See also William S. Burroughs, 'The Future of the Novel' (1984), in: James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg (eds.), *Word Virus. The William S. Burroughs Reader*, New York, Grove Press, 1998, pp. 272–273.
19. For the history of the terms myth and mythology, see for instance A. Horstmann, 'Mythos, Mythologie' in: Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Band 6: Mo-O, Darmstadt / Basel, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft / Schwalbe & Co., 1984, pp. 281–318.
20. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), Paris, Seuil, 1970, p. 209.
21. Carl Gustav Jung, *Flying Saucers. A modern myth of things seen in the sky* (1958), London / New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 11.
22. See the summary of Scientology's secret 'OT III' course by John Atack, www.spaink.net.
23. William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (1964), New York, Grove Press, 1992, p. 4.
24. Quoted in Miles, op. cit. (note 18), p. 148.

25. Ibid., p. 135.
26. Burroughs, op. cit. (note 23), p. 75.
27. Ibid., pp. 4, 7.

## Tags

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