

Conspiratorial Narratives in Violent Political Actors' Language

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Introduction

The important role of language in triggering and sustaining political violence has repeatedly been recognized by national and international courts of justice.¹ It has, however, been overlooked by social and political psychologists; indeed *violent language*, which we define as the type of language that precedes and accompanies political violence, has not benefited from a sustained, systematic theoretical and empirical inquiry. Some scholars have warned against this state of affairs and tried to reverse it (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), prompting an important yet dispersed research agenda on linguistic markers potentially shared across instances of violent language. While this effort has reached a consensus stressing the importance of words that sharply delineate, reify, and polarize in- and out-group identities (e.g. Reicher et al., 2005 on “entrepreneurs of social identity”; Leyens et al., 2001; Haslam, 2006; Savage, 2013; or Haslam & Loughnan, 2014 on “dehumanizing” language), much remains to be done to fully characterize this type of language and hence better understand and evaluate its exact role in violence. Specifically, we argue here that this consensual depiction of violent actors' language is actually too superficial to offer both a truthful representation of empirical reality and a convincing theoretical framework for the explanation of the link between violent language and violence itself. Linguistic efforts to sharpen and polarize group identities are simply too widely used by non-violent actors to play a pivotal role in what Ingram (2016: 464) calls the “crossing of the violence threshold”.

The present paper provides a first step towards such a more accurate identification of the common markers of violent language. We revise the consensus with a conceptualization of violent language as structured by *conspiratorial narratives*. The aim of this contribution is thus to deepen our understanding of violent language by demonstrating that it cannot be reduced to – or perhaps even characterized as – one which solely proceeds through the construction of binary sets of sharply opposed reified in- and out-group identities. To be sure, violent language tends, on the surface, to promote an overarching ingroup/outgroup perception of the world, yet below this level it also exposes the intricate relationships supposedly interconnecting the ingroup with not just one, but numerous outgroups of various kinds, whose respective roles in an imaginary plot call for different levels and timings of violence. Even the most violent and uncompromising actors such as the Nazis or the so-called Islamic State (IS), whose messaging is commonly understood as fundamentally dichotomous and resting on sharp “us” vs “them” identity constructs, have at the heart of their messaging a sophisticated conspiratorial narrative involving many groups of different statuses

and levels of responsibility in the alleged problem – and who therefore constitute more or less urgent targets for variously violent retributive tactics.

To conceptualize conspiratorial narratives and their role in violence, this paper builds both at once upon the “surge of scholarly interest in rumors and conspiracy theories” (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007, p.353) that occurred in the 2000s and still continues to this day (e.g. Douglas et al., 2019) and the growing research agenda on narratives in politics generally (Jones & MacBeth, 2010; Jones & Radaelli, 2015) and extremism in particular (e.g. Halverson, Corman, & Goodall, 2011). We are not the first ones to stress the importance of either conspiracy theories or narratives in political extremism and violence. In fact, what prompted the present intervention is precisely the observation, by scholars working separately on different cases (Nazi propaganda, Hutu génocidaire communications, “counter-jihad” online communities, etc.) that conspiracies and narratives constitute an important part of the language they study. The present paper brings observations from some of these separate cases together as empirical evidence to demonstrate the central role conspiratorial narratives play in violent language and to enrich our theoretical account of the mechanisms through which these narratives operate.

Our contribution is therefore twofold, and the paper accordingly proceeds in two steps. The first section offers a theoretical contribution: we enrich social psychology’s account of the language that precedes and accompanies political violence, correcting approaches that only emphasize linguistic attempts to reify in- and out-group identities. Building on the recent scholarship on conspiracy theories and political narratives, we introduce the concept of conspiratorial narrative. We identify conspiratorial narratives as the common marker of violent language, and expose the theoretical relevance of the concept to social psychology by showing that it helps explaining the link between violent language and violence – more precisely, *why violence happens, how much violence is directed to whom, and when it occurs*. Such a contribution bears important implications not only for scholars, but also for the increasing number of intelligence professionals involved in monitoring extremist online activities. A caveat is warranted at this stage: we do not address – let alone solve – the question as to whether conspiratorial narratives are spread by people who believe in them or if they are disseminated instrumentally to appeal to individuals more likely to believe in them; our focus is solely on the already important task of illuminating common linguistic patterns of a specific kind of discourse. The second section is empirical: it provides qualitative evidence that conspiratorial narratives are a significant, common marker of violent language. Using the theoretical framework developed in the first section, we examine three prominent and very different cases of violent language, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of

conspiratorial narratives and empirically demonstrate the analytical value of the concept when it comes to understanding the occurrence of violence, as well as its timing and targeting patterns.

Conspiratorial Narratives: A Theoretical Framework

i. Social Psychology and violent language

Surprisingly, social psychology has not paid systematic attention to the many ways through which language contributes to political violence. In particular, research on the typical markers of violent language is still underdeveloped; to use Reicher and colleagues' words (2005, p.623), "studies very rarely look at precisely what is being said" in situations of intergroup conflict. If it is true that "speeches associated with aggression [have] different linguistic markers than speeches associated with nonaggression" (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, p.335), then research still has to make clear what these markers are.

To be sure recent scholarship has made significant progress in addressing this gap, building on pioneering work on language and intergroup processes (e.g. Billig, 1991, 1996; Hopkins & Reicher, 1997 on intergroup rhetoric; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989 on linguistic intergroup bias). A consensual view has emerged, contending that the crucial feature of violent language is the use of group labels that homogenize and reify social categories in ways that reinforce a dichotomous perception of a fully positive ingroup opposing a wholly negative outgroup. For example, Reicher and colleagues (2005) offered a conceptualization of the "entrepreneurs of social identity" whose rhetoric constructs binary sets of sharply opposed ingroup/outgroup identities. Donohue's (2012) conceptualization of the "identity trap", which he argues characterizes the "language of genocide," highlights the same patterns of categories reification, promotion of rigid classification, and dehumanization, which together "combine to establish a social context that builds up the speaker's social identity while denigrating the 'enemy's' social identity" (2012, p.13). Work on dehumanization (e.g. Leyens et al., 2001; Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) usually theorize it as the most extreme form of negative outgroup identity construction. Savage's (2013) conceptualization of dehumanization as a "discursive strategy" implying outgroup exclusion, denial and essentialization, has been an important step in acknowledging its linguistic and communicative dimension.

Empirical studies have tended to reflect this focus on extremely polarizing identity categorization. Roozen and Shulman's (2014) analysis of the Hutu génocidaire Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (henceforth RTLM), for example, measured the saliency of a range of outgroup categories – including dehumanizing ones – in the radio transcripts. A cursory look at the language of violent political actors seems sufficient to prove the pertinence of this

consensus: from RTLM to the “Islamic State”’s Al-Bayan Radio, from Nazi pamphlets to the Army of God’s website, reified identity categories and dehumanizing labels abound and surely constitute a key feature of violent language. Yet we precisely suggest to move beyond such a view and to consider how another important marker of violent language – conspiratorial narration – forces us to amend this consensual view.

ii. Conspiratorial narratives in violent language

Moving beyond the consensual view is necessary in two interrelated respects. First, violent language, while on the surface resembling its depiction by scholars, is actually much more complex, less dichotomous and more dynamic than acknowledged. To be sure, Reicher and colleagues (2005) acknowledge identity as a “multi-level system”, but their analysis is still deeply rooted in Social Identity Theory’s reliance on the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy, which needs to be amended. Second, and as Matsumoto and Hwang (2013) already highlighted, focusing solely on polarizing identity categories falls short of explaining the specific relationship between language and the actual eruption of violence. Attention to these labels helps explain negative attitudes and behaviors (such as why members of a group come to despise or hate members or another group, or why they might be desensitized to harm being done to this outgroup) but violence remains underdetermined if there is no account of how exactly the various groups allegedly interact. Again, Reicher and colleagues (2005, pp.630-631) do recognize that violent language relies on a certain presentation of the relationships between the “we” and the “they”, in particular on a construction of the outgroup “as a problem, or, more acutely, a threat for the ingroup”. However, even though the identification of the outgroup with a threat is crucial, the association between one outgroup and a threat is rarely as straightforward and usually accompanied by a range of other rhetorical devices.

Therefore, while Matsumoto and Hwang tried to overcome the first issue by *broadening* the approach, i.e. by looking at non-identity related linguistic markers pertaining to linguistic style (psychometrically abnormal language use revealing for example low cognitive complexity), we suggest that research also needs to *deepen* the analysis with finer-grained accounts of groups depictions that are consistent with empirical reality, hence correcting the second issue at the same time. Specifically, and as stated above, we argue that attuning to the omnipresence of conspiratorial narratives in violent language provides for a more faithful depiction of such language and more powerful explanation of its ability to trigger violence.

A conspiratorial narrative is a linguistic construct that combines the characteristics of conspiracy theories with those of narratives. On the one hand, conspiracy theories are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by one or two more powerful actors”

(Douglas et al., 2019, p.4). Their role in prejudice, radicalization and violent intentions is increasingly recognized (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015; Douglas, et al., 2019). On the other hand, a narrative is “the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent” (Ricoeur, 1980, p.169); put differently narratives present of a range of events within a single, integrated chronological sequence. While there are many possible narrative forms (e.g. Greimas, 1971), most entail “an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that re-establishes order” (Antoniades, O’Loughlin, & Miskimmon 2010, p.4). While the study of narratives has made its ways in Psychology following Bruner’s description of narrative thinking (e.g. Bruner 1985; 1991), it has only been more recently integrated into Political Science and Social Psychology’s conceptual toolbox.² Crucially, scholarship agrees on three major aspects of narratives. First, they are “selective”, that is, they include certain events while ignoring others (Antoniades, O’Loughlin, & Miskimmon, 2010). Second, the diachronic character of narratives create particular anticipations about the future on the basis of the events contained and ignored by the narrative. As Ricoeur (1980, p.174) explains, narratives’ directedness entail “expectations concerning the outcome and the completion of the entire process, [...] the story’s conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development.” As such, political actors strive to build “strategic narratives” that aim to build, among their audiences, a specific understanding of the past that encourages a particular set of preferences for the future (Antoniades, O’Loughlin, & Miskimmon, 2010). Narratives, as Bruner (1991, p.15) puts it, are in this way “necessarily normative”; the inclusion of symbols in the storytelling reinforces the narrative’s build-up towards its culmination (Jones and McBeth, 2010). Third, narratives are inevitably populated by archetypal actors, either nefarious or admirable, each playing its own function in the unfolding of events (e.g. Greimas, 1971).

A conspiratorial narratives can hence be defined as a *story which integrates, in a single teleological explanation for the alleged suffering of a given social group, a large range of events from past and present that are allegedly hidden and provoked by various nefarious archetypal actors*. We suggest that conspiratorial narratives constitute the structuring linguistic marker of violent extremists’ language. Specifically, in conspiratorial narratives, four nefarious archetypal actors (far outgroup, close outgroup, traitors, contaminated ingroup) are presented as working together to oppress a particular ingroup and disseminate misleading perceptions of events in order to cover their malevolent deeds (official, legitimate providers of truth therefore ought to be doubted). The conspiratorial narrative’s selective presentation of past events provides “evidence” or this history of oppression, and therefore only contains one possible and desirable ending: the overthrow of the conspiring actors by the righteous ingroup. Indeed if this corrective intervention does not take place, the plot would carry on forever.

As we demonstrate in the second section, such narratives are not only ubiquitous in violent language, they also play a pivotal role in audiences' decision to actively engage in violence. We do not claim here that either conspiracies or narratives are the prerogative of violent extremists, but that their combination as conspiratorial narratives is a defining feature of violent language. Paying attention to conspiratorial narratives leads us to revise the idea that violent language is necessarily binary, dichotomous in nature, and helps explaining violence as the product not simply of extreme perceptions of in- and out-groups' identities (who they *are*) but also of perceptions of these groups' actions (what they *do*). Specifically, we suggest that conspiratorial narratives determine not only the arrival of violence (why violence?), but also its timing (violence when?), and its targets (which violence to whom?), hence correcting social psychology's shortcoming in explaining the "when and where" conflict occurs (Reicher, 2004).

iii. Which violence to whom, why, and when?

Why violence? In line with Ingram's (2016) crisis/solution model of extremist propaganda, which characterizes it as a type of communication that "buttresses the innate positive traits *and actions* of the in-group and the negative traits *and actions* of the out-groups" (our emphasis; also note Ingram's plural form for "outgroups"), we suggest here that individuals don't kill other people simply because of who they think they are (identity categorization perspective) but more importantly because of what they think these people have done. In other words, an important *motive* is needed for violence to occur, and conspiratorial narratives provide the most powerful possible motive for three reasons..

First, conspiratorial narratives are coherent and complexity-reducing heuristic constructs. Conspiracy theories are "self-sealing" constructs (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008) that "offer wonderfully unified accounts of all the data at hand" (Keeley, 1999, p.119). This is why it can be argued that "conspiracy theorists are some of the last believers in an ordered universe" where everything happens for a reason, and "the greater the event, the greater and more significant the reason" (Keeley, 1999, pp.123-124). Narratives' selectivity reinforces this impression of both coherence and fantastic "explanatory reach" (Keeley, 1999, p.119). With recent interventions stressing the role of complexity-reducing heuristics in extremism and violence (e.g. Fernbach et al., 2013; Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013; Baele, 2015), the role of conspiratorial narratives in providing individuals with a unifying explanation of social and political events should not be underestimated. Conspiratorial narratives explain how the social and political world works by exposing the importance (and in some cases existence) of a series of groups, and by mapping how their interactions produce oppression for the ingroup. As such, their key feature is to identify not only one outgroup, but several – potentially many – groups involved to various degrees in the plot oppressing the ingroup.

The “knowledge” of such as structure constitutes a fertile cognitive ground for the justification of, and motivation to engage in, violence.

Second and in addition to this, conspiratorial narratives’ suggestion that the “truth” they expose is actively hidden to those who do not know it, further explains the link between this type of language and violence. With legitimate authorities either complicit or ignorant of the plot, conspiracies promote “a strongly anti-democratic” stance that “delegitimizes belief in official channels and democratic participation” (Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014, p.772; also Huang, 2015; Einstein & Glick, 2015). In conspiratorial narratives, the ingroup – or a small vanguard within it – is positively depicted as the sole holder of truth, the only group authentic or intelligent enough to be capable of clear vision, with other groups either deceived or propagating lies. Individuals “enlightened” to the “real” social structure cannot hope to see the police, army or justice deal with the problem, which restricts the range of actors able to end the plot to a select elite from the ingroup. As Fenster (1999) argued, the supposed deception of the masses means that individuals attuned to the plot reinterpret their own situation and believe that they have an active role to play in carrying out corrective action, since everyone else is deceived. And since conspiratorial narratives depict wide plots deeply embedded in every level of society and skillfully maneuvered and hidden by powerful actors, the situation can therefore not be combatted through “soft” means only: the ingroup has to take radical action.

Finally, conspiratorial narratives are usually clear about whom among the many archetypal actors involved in the plot are most responsible for the adverse social and political events (real or made-up) selected in the narrative, which creates clear blame attribution. Such blame attribution feeds varying levels of group-based outrage and negative emotions, thereby fueling intergroup polarization (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008). Importantly, conspiratorial narratives not only identify a series of contemptible outgroups but also explain the specific reason why *each* should be hated and combatted. Nefarious agents who are assumed to have total agency and power,³ are thus to be hated not only for who they are but for what they *do*, and confronted accordingly. In other words, conspiratorial narratives work hand in hand with negative labels: not only does violent language mention who the enemies are and negatively characterizes them, it also explains what each of them has done and continues to do against the ingroup. As such, they provide a good motive to engage in radical action that seeks retribution, they produce negative long-term sentiments such as resentment or anger (which are well-known drivers of violence, see e.g. Halperin & Gross 2011 among many others), and they offer a powerful legitimation for the conduct of violence (since the ingroup is presented as the victim of powerful malevolent groups’ aggression and oppression). Violence is understood as a virtuous self-defense of the ingroup.⁴

In sum, conspiratorial narratives clearly identify a range of outgroups, map their interactions, proclaims that they are powerful and deceitful, expose the harm they do to the ingroup, and suggest that it is left to those who know the “truth” to react against this oppression. Together, these characteristics constitute a significant “push” factor towards violence, which is all the more powerful if the kind of negative identity categorization emphasized in the literature is employed to talk about the identified outgroups.

Violence when? Conspiracy theories alone do not trigger violence. Indeed as many studies in the lineage of Goertzel’s seminal intervention (1994) have now documented, belief in conspiracy theories is quite widespread.⁵ What is specific about violent language is its presentation of the conspiracy in a narrative way, as a story coming to an imminent end with the victory of the rightful ingroup. Indeed the crucial component that differentiates mainstream conspiratorial discourse from the conspiratorial narratives featuring in violent language is the embeddedness of the conspiracy within a large-scale storyline that provokes, to use Ricoeur’s (1980, p.174) words once more, “expectations concerning the outcome and the completion of the entire process.” As Ingram (2016) acutely observed, extremist propaganda tends to depict the ingroup as the provider of the solution for a crisis initiated and sustained by the outgroup; in his words, “bipolarized perceptions of the world thus work to simultaneously solidify the link between the out-group and crisis and the imperative to implement the in-group’s solution” (2016, p.465). This “crisis to solution” teleological structure helps explaining not only why violence occurs – as ingroup members are convinced that a solution is at hand and that they have a role to play in the inevitable overthrow of the plot – but also when it takes place. Specifically, as conspiratorial narratives suggest that the end point of the plot is imminent, that the solution is within reach in the present or near future, they incite to commit violence immediately. Because violent actors who disseminate conspiratorial narratives seek to trigger violence in the very short term, conspiratorial narratives typically insist that the plotters can and should be confronted at once. A sense of urgency is usually conveyed, meaning that “crossing the ‘violence threshold’” not only “signals an extreme bifurcation of in- and out-group identities” but also results from “gravely acute perceptions of crisis [that] highlight the urgency with which a more radical solution must be imposed: violence against others” (Ingram, 2016, p.466).

Yet given the complex structure of the conspiracy and the number of groups and individuals involved in the narrative, conspiratorial narratives leave room for tactics, which explains why violence against particular groups occurs before violence against other groups. As the cases examined below show, arguments can be made that violence should first be unleashed at the outgroup identified as the one directing the plot at a distance, or conversely that another one down the chain and closer to the ingroup should be destroyed first as it is the one causing the most

direct harm. Paying attention to the timing of events implied by conspiratorial narratives can also explain dynamic patterns of violence timings. A regular rhetorical tactic of groups and individuals disseminating conspiratorial narratives is to change the alleged chronological unfolding of events constituting the narrative in order to trigger a sudden rise in violence against one group or drop in aggression against another one, even when polarizing or dehumanizing labels remain used in a constant way across the board.

Which violence to whom? Finally, attuning to conspiratorial narratives helps explain why some groups are targeted more violently and systematically than others, which is hard to account for by only looking at how these groups are depicted and labeled. Differentiated group targeting is not only due to the chronological dimension of the narrative; it also results from the varying levels of responsibility assigned to different groups in the conspiracy, which imply differentiated levels and forms of retributive violence. Three axes of differentiation exist (that together illustrate why characterizing violent language as sharply dichotomous is too reductive analytically). First, conspiratorial narratives usually imply that some groups are less or more “evil” than others. Second, some groups are located closer or further away from the ingroup, either geographically or in terms of everyday encounters. Third, some groups are presented as less neatly distinct from the ingroup than others, either in terms of responsibility in the crisis or in terms of their identity. Acknowledging this threefold differentiation leads us to move beyond the superficial ingroup/outgroup dichotomy and towards a finer-grained identification of five “archetypal characters” or groups populating conspiratorial narratives; this helps us understand their respective fate in the narrative’s violent denouement. Figure 1 below represents these five archetypal groups.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

First, there are two possible types of out-groups. *Far outgroups* are those at the origins of the crisis, constituting the edge of the conspiratorial narrative; they are the first cause of the problem, they animate the plot at a distance. Usually they are out of reach or more difficult to hit. Some far outgroups do so in an instrumental way, other ones are less intentional, which means that some are more guilty than others. In contrast, *close outgroups* are those with a secondary role in the plot, who tend to be located closer (geographically or in terms of everyday encounters) to the ingroup. They are either inferior to (or even subjugated by) the far outgroups, carrying out the far outgroups’ orders and implementing them to oppress the ingroup, or depicted as equals working with the far outgroups in win-win collaborations to maintain their own, specific situation.

Second, and crucially, there are two hybrid groups conceptually situated at the border between the ingroup and outgroups, and which usually play a pivotal role in conspiratorial narratives. Two archetypes exist, and often interact.

First, *traitors* are originally ingroup members who more or less intentionally promote the outgroup's interests. They might work for an outgroup's organization, promote friendship with one or several outgroups, embrace theories or ideologies that imply policies favoring outgroups. Second, the *contaminated ingroup* is made of ingroup members whose identity is partially changed following contact with outgroup members: individuals marrying or having sexual intercourse with outgroup members, and people who convert to an outgroup's religion or tradition, are prime examples. While the line between them and traitors, which boils down to intentionality, is sometimes thin and can shift according to changes in the violent group's ideology or strategy, cases discussed below demonstrate that it is a crucial distinction when it comes to choosing or rejecting violence. The *pure ingroup* is the fifth archetypal character; as already highlighted in the literature, language that produces a positive homogenous ingroup is as important as language that negatively portrays outgroups (e.g. Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008).

This plurality in terms of malevolence, responsibility, and agency, means that arguments follow in terms of the level of violence deemed adequate for each group. For example, traitors might be given temporary mercy because they have a path to redemption and originally belong to the ingroup, while uncompromising violence is advocated against a distant outgroup who has to be eradicated because of its primary role in the crisis. Yet another narrative might lead to prioritize the eradication of traitors and contaminated ingroup members in a bid to purify the ingroup before its final, narrative-ending encounter with the outgroups. Attuning to the plurality of groups also helps explain differentiated levels of violence against various components of a single outgroup or hybrid group; for example, killing children and women might be acceptable when it comes to the contaminated ingroup (for example to preserve the purity of the ingroup), but might not be seen as adequate for a distant outgroup.

Conspiratorial Narratives in Action: Three Cases

In this empirical section we put our concept of conspiratorial narrative at play to demonstrate its added value relative to approaches focusing solely on markers of binary group categorization. We explore three prominent yet different cases of violent language: Nazi propaganda, Hutu génocidaires' media, and IS propaganda. These three cases are studied following George and Bennett's (2005) principles for qualitative "structured and focused comparison", which requires to examine, for each one of the selected cases, the same specific aspects determined by a single overarching question, in such a way that these selected cases can easily be complemented by additional ones at a later stage. Here the selected aspects are the linguistic markers of conspiratorial narratives: group labels (specifically the five archetypal actors) and depictions of these groups' nature, on the one hand, and claims about

these group's actions, on the other hand. The overarching question is whether and how these markers are found across different cases of violent language, and how these manifestations help explain patterns of violence.

This approach echoes Kaarbo and Beasley's (1999, p.372) support of the comparative case-study method in Political Psychology, which they defined as the "empirical examination of a real-world phenomenon within its naturally occurring context, without directly manipulating either the phenomenon or the context, [... with...] systematic comparison of two or more data points ('cases')". We content that such an approach is particularly warranted here as our main goal is, to use Kaarbo and Beasley's (1999) own words, both to "develop" a novel theoretical framework and to "refine" a more established one, not to engage in a hypothetic-deductive process. Qualitative evidence offers rich illustrations of theoretical models that allow us to "remain as close as possible to the symbolic system in which sense-making occurs" (Smith, 2015, p.2) while complementing quantitative studies (e.g. Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997; Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003) and . Computer-assisted tools (such as topic modeling or semantic network analysis) constitute potentially fruitful quantitative paths to further develop our analysis further and test our framework across a larger number of cases. In this regard, we consider our analysis as part of a broader effort carried out across methodological boundaries to model the linguistic markers of violent language, recognizing the necessity for scholars to "increasingly work collaboratively across methodological divides to advance shared substantive research programs" (George & Bennett, 2005, p.5).

The analysis of each case rests on a close reading of the entire content of three different archives. For Nazi Germany propaganda, we used the *German Propaganda Archive* hosted by Randall Bytwerk at Calvin College (<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/>). For Hutu génocidaires' media, we relied on the *Rwanda Radio Transcripts* repository hosted by Concordia University and the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (<http://www.concordia.ca/research/migs/resources/rwanda-radio-transcripts.html>), which provides access to an almost comprehensive list of the RTLM transcripts originally commissioned by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. For IS material, we used our own comprehensive collection of the group's magazines collected for a previous project, in conjunction with the *Jihadology* repository hosted by Aaron Zelin (<http://jihadology.net>). In each of these cases, we looked for the presence of the various linguistic markers of conspiratorial narratives identified in the previous section, trying to see if the particular way these markers present themselves can help to explain the specific patterns of the violence (level, target, timing) conducted by each group. For the sake of clarity, we already list in Table 1 below the five archetypal groups structuring each of the three conspiratorial narratives.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

i. Nazi propaganda

Scholars analyzing Nazi propaganda through lens of social identity approaches have stressed the linguistic (but also visual) construction, in the many different outlets constituting it (posters, newspapers, radio broadcasts, etc.), of homogenous and sharply opposed self- and other- group identities; they have also documented the use of derogatory labels to name the outgroup. Kohl's (2011) contribution, for example, characterizes the produced message as sharply "binary; a person belongs to either the ingroup or outgroup" (Kohl, 2010, p.10), and stresses the importance of the dehumanization of Jews in the formation of this message (2010, p.17). While she complements this analysis of group categorization by observing that Germans' and Jews' "alleged past, present or future actions" are also talked about (Kohl, 2010, p.18), she understands these references as rhetoric devices designed to reinforce the positive/negative identities of the Germans and the Jews. We suggest that conceptualizing these references as central tenets of a conspiratorial narrative allows us to better understand the strength of Nazi's language and its relationship to violence.

Prominent specialists of Nazi propaganda have already noted the conspiratorial nature of Nazis' message. Kallis, for example, claims that "the crucial process that invests [it] with meaning is its particular *emplotment*", and alludes to the narrative dimension of the conspiracy when he further explains that it "links past, present and future in a meaningful, coherent way" (Kallis, 2005, p.64, emphasis in the original). For him, the "Bolshevik-Jewish conspiracy [...] was significantly more than the sum of its constituent parts (Jews, 'Asiatic hordes', socialists); it was a crucial device for the self-legitimation of NS ideology" (Kallis, 2005, p.71). Herf (2005, p.51) likewise argues that Nazi propaganda is held together by a "paranoid conspiracy theory" whereby "'Jewry' comprised powers behind the scenes in London, Moscow, and Washington."

These and other similar interventions stress the presence, in Nazi's message, of a range of interacting groups that closely match our typology of archetypal actors. In terms of far outgroups, the Nazis identify foreign powers and their elites (the "English-French warmongering clique," the "London plutocracy," etc.), "Bolsheviks" (and related structures such as the "Moscow World Communist International," etc.), and of course behind all of them "World Jewry," a term used throughout Nazi propaganda's history. In terms of close outgroups, they singled out German and later European Jews not belonging to the alleged elite of "World Jewry." Nazis were also obsessed by the two hybrid groups and continuously emphasized this concern in their communications. On the one hand, Germans who did not embrace the Nazi regime or supported the "Bolshevik" project were seen as dangerous traitors to the

“Aryan” cause (sometimes instrumentally, sometimes deceived by the “Bolshevik infection”). On the other hand, “Aryan” Germans who married Jews or had Jewish ancestry (“*Mischlinge*”) constituted a worryingly contaminated ingroup, alongside the various categories of people with an “inherited illness” who supposedly threatened the purity of the Aryan race (“morons,” “idiots,” the “schizophrenic,” the “alcoholic,” etc.). These groups interact in many ways, with the ultimate result being the alleged oppression of the German people. A range of events, such as the First World War, the Versailles Treaty, the Reichstag fire, or the economic hardship of the 1920s-1930s, are presented as evidence of this conspiracy and serve as pivotal moments in the narrative that seeks to provide the Germans with a self-sealing, total understanding of their highly unstable and complex environment. Consider for example the following passage from Goebbels’ essay “The European Crisis” (first published in the *Das Reich* magazine, 28 February 1943):⁶

“Bolshevism is attempting to put on a veneer of Western civilization, while plutocracy is putting on the Jacobin hat as needed and speaks in a revolutionary mish-mash that attempts to conceal the remaining distance between it and Bolshevism. The Kremlin tells Downing Street and the White House that the plutocracy reigning there is not all that bad. In London and Washington, fine gentlemen in frock coats and cardinals in their robes eagerly attempt to whitewash Bolshevism and Stalin, making them appear to be innocent angels.”

This conspiratorial narrative added depth to the dehumanizing depiction of Jewish people as inferior and the negative labeling of Germany’s many enemies, thereby adding a series of motives and justifications for the use of violence. Consider as well the following passage from “The War Goal of World Plutocracy,” a widely circulated pamphlet written by Wolfgang Diewerge and published in 1941:⁷

“Bolshevism and liberalism were allied through their common Jewish foundations in the domestic German struggle against National Socialism, so today London, New York, and Moscow are arm and arm in the effort to create a second, more terrible Treaty of Versailles. This second Treaty of Versailles will bear no more relationship to the Potomac Declaration than the first Treaty of Versailles bore to Wilson’s declarations. World Jewry in New York, Moscow, and London agrees on the complete destruction of the German people.”

The complex, multi-layered aggression of the German people by multiple enemies, with “World Jewry” acting as the farthest enemy, provided legitimized violence against Jews and, from 1940, the Allied states. As Herf (2005) showed, the main motive and justification for the genocide of the Jews was not their alleged inferiority but this “war of extermination that Jewry had supposedly launched against Germany.” Violence is presented as the only possible option left to the German people when facing such a deep, wide, powerful and destructive plot. As Hitler repeatedly made clear in his speeches, trying to address the problem with moderate changes within the system cannot work as too many of its members are part of the problem: only violence can be enough. In his 30 January 1937 speech (“National Socialism and World Relations”), for example, he argues that Germans’ “distress” “cannot be eradicated by a mere change of government” which would bring “positive advantage only to the actors who took part in the play.” Ruling out “the custodians and the more or less responsible representatives of the old regime, or the political

organizations founded under the old form of the Constitution,” Hitler insists that the “fight will have to be undertaken even at the sacrifice of life and blood, if that should be necessary.”

In this conspiratorial narrative, the Nazi vanguard saves the German people first by enlightening it, by exposing the “reality” and imminent nature of its dangerous situation, by telling the “truth” (e.g. Bytwerk, 2015) about its multiple enemies, and only then by guiding it to action. Germans are associated with truth and knowledge, while its many enemies are accused of using deception, lies, and hidden maneuvers to destroy the German people. Diewerge’s pamphlet, for example, operates this contrast many times in ways that encourage those “who know” to regroup and act. For example, he insists that “today the German people knows what is at stake. It knows how to distinguish between the lying humanitarian slogans that come from the Potomac and the real plan of extermination by Jewish President Nathan Kaufman. The German people knows that the International Jew stands behind the war will of world plutocracy, and warmongers throughout the world. It knows that these hate-filled opponents have only one chance of success: the disunity of the German people. [...] All German men and women are fighting and working together in an inseparable people’s community until the victorious conclusion of this struggle.” Goebbels’ aforementioned essay, among many similar pieces, similarly emphasizes the Nazi leaders’ ability to provide Germans with the explanation of their suffering; whereas Germans have previously been “searching in vain for the answer to this riddle”, thanks to the Nazis “the answer is clear” once “one shines a light on the background” and discovers the truth about “international Jewry” and its links with “plutocracy and Bolshevism.”

In line with our theoretical expectations, the interactions between the “international Jewry” and the German people are consistently presented as a longstanding problem evolving into a crisis of unprecedented level, which has to be dealt with immediately. This narrative, which was reinforced as the war erupted, provoked expectations in terms of the necessity to “solve” the crisis at once in order to restore the ingroup’s safety and status. As written in a widely circulated pamphlet from 1942 (Baumböck, 1942), Jews “unleashed a new world war” in order to “rule all the nations by controlling their government organs, their territory, their money, and all their goods.” Yet, it is argued, this crisis should be taken as the unique opportunity to confront the threat, “the time to finally solve the Jewish question.” In later publication (Ley, 1944) that situates the conflict as the culminating moment of “a civil war that has lasted a thousand years” (marked by figures such as “Charlemagne, Prince Eugen, Frederick the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte”), we can read that “Jewish Bolshevism is at the gates, and must be fought, whatever the cost.” This narrative endpoint is present across many types of publications. For instance, a 1944 leaflet summarizing the major talking points ahead of a meeting for party members⁸ insists that the war brings about, “for the first time in our

history,” the opportunity to “choose between being devoured by the parasite or destroying it.” Deploring that “there are still those of our people who are not entirely comfortable when we speak of the extermination of the Jews,” the text emphasized both at once the longstanding character of the conflict and the narrative endpoint (the “battle to the end”), saluting “the strengths of character and action of the greatest man of our people in a thousand years to rip the Jewish blindfold from our eyes.”

The structure of the Nazis’ conspiratorial narrative makes little doubt as to which group should suffer from maximal violence: the Jews. While killing other groups through war is inevitable, the most important objective is to annihilate the Jews. Since the supposed foreign Jewish elite is out of reach, Germans have to begin by exterminating those who live locally, as well as to preemptively purify their “race” by sterilizing or killing Germans with an “inherited illness.” Yet this prioritization has shifted across time, reflecting the regime’s strategic priority as much as the evolution of its ideology and the gradual rise of the SS in the state system. As Essner (1995; also Pegelow, 2006) for example showed, a lively debate opposed “race specialists” supporting the “contamination” thesis and those championing the “biological” one, which had severe consequences in terms of the level of violence to be adopted against both Jews and “Mischlinge,” as well as the level of prioritization of their killing. Similarly, Bytwerk (2005) documented how the assignment of responsibility in the Nazi “emplotment” effort shifted several times between 1930 and 1945, usually incrementally, sometimes abruptly such as when the “Bolsheviks” disappeared from the plot with the Molotov-Ribbentrop accord but reappeared just as swiftly and saliently during the week of Germany’s invasion of Russia in 1941. Similarly, the distant “Yellow” peril disappeared from schoolbooks and Nazi racial propaganda as soon as Japan and Germany secured an alliance.⁹ These examples make clear how the levels, type, and timing of violence respectively advocated to deal with the various groups have varied according to their respective responsibility in the overall conspiratorial narrative.

ii. Hutu génocidaires’ media

The various outlets created by extremist proponents of “Hutu Power” (Des Forges, 2007, p.9) in the first half of the 1990s constitute another well-studied case of violent language involved in encouraging support for or direct participation in genocide. In line with social psychology’s theoretical doxa, many scholars have emphasized the dichotomous and Manichean construction of the opposing “Hutu” and “Tutsi” identities. For example, Baisley (2014, p.38) analyzed how RTLM “broadcasts ‘othered’ the target group by simultaneously drawing on multiple constructions of Hutu and Tutsi identities”, while Roozen and Shulman’s (2014) tracking of the evolution of language in the same broadcasts identified and counted key dehumanizing labels (such as the notorious “inyenzi,” a

term at times meaning “cockroach”). Yet in fact Hutu extremists’ message was as multi-layered as Nazis’, and similarly articulated the same archetypal characters in a conspiratorial narrative. Tutsi’s and Hutu’s radically opposed identities can only truly be understood within in the broader narrative context within which they are situated and which they structured.

Detailed analysis of Hutu génocidaires’ language have already pointed to conspiratorial elements. Verwimp’s (2000) analysis of Habyarimana’s speeches, which is one of the few attempts to investigate texts predating RTLM, has shown that the “Hutu” and “Tutsi” categories constituted the central but not unique characters of a broader teleological story according to which Rwanda was finally going to become, thanks to its presidents’ actions, a perfect rural community. In this “rural romanticism,” the “Hutu were the real peasants of Rwanda; the Tutsi were the feudal class closely associated with colonialist occupation” (Verwimp, 2000, p.326). During the years preceding the genocide, several extremist outlets emerged (such as RTLM or *Kangura* magazines) and started to deepen this conspiratorial narrative and situate reified “Tutsi” and “Hutu” categories alongside a range of other archetypal groups.

First, a variety of far outgroups were said to act against the Hutus at a distance in differentiated ways. Whites in general were depicted as the “architects” of the Rwandese situation at the turn of the 1990s, and their collusion with the Tutsis in the colonial and post-colonial era was emphasized (e.g. RTLM transcript 14.01.1994). Belgians in particular were said to play a key role in the establishment and general perpetuation of this system,¹⁰ to participate as mercenaries in anti-Hutu massacres (e.g. RTLM 29.05.1994), to be on a mission to “kill people in Rwanda and our high ranked officer and to destroy RTLM” (RTLM 22.04.1994), to have instructed the assassination of Habyarimana (read Des Forges, 1999, p.149), and to further oppress the Rwandan Hutu population through predatory sex practices (similarly Médecins Sans Frontiere is said to encourage “homosexual prostitutes,” RTLM 18.06.1994 II), which made them particularly blamable. As an RTLM journalist summed up, “Belgians are our enemies, that’s all” (RTLM 15.05.1994). International or transnational actors like the UN and UNAMIR are alleged to cement this system and deceive the Rwandese in presenting it as just and fair. Individuals working for these organizations, above all Romeo Dallaire, supposedly cover up acts of aggression against the Hutus to reinforce the “lying” official view that Tutsis are the victims (see for example RTLM transcript 16-17.05.1994 where Dallaire is accused of “knowing” that Hutus were “killed one by one” but nonetheless propagating the view that the victims were Tutsis), and even plot to “push the events” and “inflame the situation” (RTLM 02.07.1994). Foreign journalists further manipulate information about Rwanda to spread the lie (e.g. RTLM 16-17.05.1994; 02.07.1994).

Second, close outgroups – chiefly Uganda and exiled Rwandan Tutsi factions – are said to collude both together and with the far outgroups, against the Hutus. This multi-layer conspiracy provides a total, coherent self-sealing explanation a wide range of events experienced directly or indirectly by the Rwandan population. Real events from the 1980s and early 1990s take a prominent place in this conspiratorial narrative, like the Arusha accords, the 1990 La Baule meeting, and above all the country’s civil war, the pre-1990 clashes, and ultimately the assassination of Habyarimana. These events are presented in a heavily biased way and often mixed up with made-up evidence to link them more clearly to the Hutu-Tutsi struggle (for instance, the presentation of the assassination of Burundi’s Hutu president Melchior Ndadaye in 1993 is accompanied by claims that it was carried out as part of a Tutsi castration ritual; read Des Forges, 2007). Grand undercover projects, such as the alleged hidden plan to create a great Tutsi state in Central Africa, or Tutsi’s role in helping to re-colonize the region (Des Forges, 1999, pp.96-97), are “unveiled” in ways that help the audience to make sense of the many reported events together. The dehumanization of Tutsis and direct calls to exterminate the “inkotanyi”¹¹ should be understood within this broader conspiratorial narrative.

Just like the Nazis, Hutus génocidaires consistently aired concerns about hybrid groups. The archetype of the contaminated ingroup is not prominent yet nonetheless present in various forms, from biological contamination in the sense of Hutus victims of Belgian sex practices or having relationships with Tutsis, to ideological contamination in the sense of Hutus believing Whites’ and Tutsi propaganda. Crucial, however, was propaganda’s emphasis that the ingroup was undermined from within by traitors: notions such as the “inkotanyi infiltration” or “spies” encouraged the audience to distrust the appearances, and support actions enhancing the purity of their ingroup (Des Forges, 1999, p.88-90). As one of Hatzfeld’s (2005, p.204) Hutu interviewees explained, the Tutsi “would act nice and seen obliging, but underneath he was constantly scheming,” while the RTLM (10.04.1994) warned that “these people [the “spies”] are really plotting with the Inyenzi-Inkotanyi in order to kill Rwandans.” Already in a 1990 issue of the *Kangura* magazine, the “traitors” featured prominently in a list of the “Ten Commandments” that ought to guide the renewed “Hutu conscience”; three commandments in particular sought to prevent Hutus’ “naivety and inaction” vis-à-vis the Tutsi “threat” to the integrity of the Hutu group:

“Every Hutu must know that the Tutsi woman, wherever she may be, is working her Tutsi ethnicity. In consequence, is a traitor any Hutu who:

- Acquires a Tutsi wife;
- Acquires a Tutsi concubine;
- Acquires a Tutsi secretary or protégée.

[...]

Every Hutus must know that every Tutsi is dishonest in business. Their only goal is ethnic superiority. In consequence, is a traitor any Hutu who:

- Forms a business alliance with Tutsis.

- Invests his money or public funds in a Tutsi enterprise.
- Borrows money from or loans money to a Tusti
- Grants business favors to Tutsis (import licenses, bank loans, land for construction, public markets...)

[...]

Is a traitor any Hutu who persecutes his brother Hutu for spreading and teaching this ideology.”¹²

RTLTM and other outlets insisted that all these roles and relationships, previously “hidden,” were now clearly exposed thanks to their courageous task of “telling the truth”. RTLTM claimed, for example, to “to tell the truth as it is [...], to speak the truth and describe the situation” (14.01.1994), and to be the “voice of the people that tells you the truth, even all the secrets” (14.04.1994). Once exposed, the varied responsibilities of the many outgroups and hybrid groups in the conspiratorial narrative offered a clear motive for violent retribution. Just like their Nazi counterparts, Hutu propagandists insisted that their struggle was one of self-defense against an existential threat. In one of his interviews on RTLTM, then Prime Minister Jean Kambanda’s for example insisted that “when someone is clearly attacked, he has to riposte.”

The sense of acute crisis disseminated in the various propaganda outlets also made clear that violence was needed at once, or else their ingroup would be totally destroyed. Claims that mass killings of Hutus were regularly committed by “bloodthirsty” Tutsis were used to reinforce this perception of emergency (for example, RTLTM transcript 23.03.1994 counts 300.000 Hutu victims and one million exiles since the country’s independence); the “inkotanyi” were said to kill with knives, to lock people in houses so they die of hunger, among others, while foreign media covered their deeds and accused the Hutus. Famously, RTLTM broadcasts insisted Hutus, as innocent victims of this multilayered aggression, engaged in violence on the spot. Yet not everyone ought to be killed, reflecting the differentiated levels of responsibility and blame in the conspiratorial narrative. RTLTM for example explicitly asked not to kill foreign journalists because even though they were guilty of propagating lies, this mischief was not as bad as other forms of aggression and could even be corrected. Tutsis and traitors, by contrast, ought to be exterminated. White individuals were similarly differentiated: the ways Belgians were talked about (see above) certainly played a role in the killing of the ten Belgian UNAMIR paratroopers. Indeed as Des Forges (1999, p.221) claims, their killing was preceded by their separation from a larger group of peacekeepers and non-Belgians were freed, which only makes sense as “Rwandan soldiers had been prepared to hate the Belgian troops by months of RTLTM broadcasts and believed the rumor—spread by their officers and later broadcast by RTLTM—that the Belgians had helped the RPF shoot down Habyarimana’s plane.”¹³

This discussion makes clear that Hutu génocidaires’ violent language cannot be reduced to a purely dichotomous messaging supported by overtly negative or positive labels and characterizations. The linguistic construction of positive Hutu and negative Tutsi, while unmistakable, only made sense within a much deeper multi-layered

conspiratorial narrative whose numerous participants received blame at differentiated levels and were targeted and prioritized accordingly.

iii. *The Islamic State*

A systematic analysis of IS' message through the prism of social identity theory remains to be done. Ingram's (2016) analysis comes close, applying his ingroup/solution versus outgroup/crisis framework (cf. above) to the terrorist organization's English-speaking magazines. It is notable that his analysis systematically uses the term outgroup in its plural form, suggesting that the crisis is presented as due to more than one outgroup. As such, he follows the literature already emphasizing the multi-layered character of the Salafi-jihadi worldview, where a range of "far enemies" are traditionally understood to collude with "near enemies" against Muslims (e.g. Brooke, 2011; Steinberg & Werenfels, 2007). While IS itself seems to embrace a radically Manichean stance, famously announcing its eradication of the "grey zone" and the "division of the world in two camps",¹⁴ and consistently uses derogatory or dehumanizing labels to name the Shi'a Muslims ("Rafidi swine," "filthy pigs," etc.; read Ramsey, 2016), the group nonetheless articulates a typical conspiratorial narrative that strictly followed the characteristics of the genre. As such, IS re-articulated a significant conspiratorial tradition in Salafi-jihadi thought that can be traced back to (at least) the writings of Sayyid Qutb, whose radical pamphlets *Our Struggle Against the Jews* (1950) and *Milestones* (1964) depicted a world where Muslims are trapped in a state of "ignorance" (*jahiliyyah*) caused by the combined actions of non-Muslim groups (above all the West) and hypocrite individuals (*munafiqun*) deceitfully pretending to be Muslims.¹⁵ Since Qutb, the idea of an unseen fundamental threat to Muslims operated by far and close outgroups, has remained a constant feature of Salafi-jihadi contributions (and even at times non-violent Islamist groups). Wistrich (2012, p.26) observes that many "Muslim fundamentalist doctrines [include] a larger Jewish-Zionist conspiracy against Islam", and traces back this "obsession" to Qutb's depiction of the "army of the learned" composed of "the secularist professors, philosophers, writers, poets, and scientists carrying Muslim names yet undermining the sacred religion of Islam "in the service of Zionism" (2012, p.26). Zeidan concurs, observing that radical Islamist groups "identify secularism in all its forms, the Christian West, Judaism (especially Zionism), and Freemasonry as part of a satanic worldwide evil plot to exterminate true Islam", and also traces back this idea to Qutb's accusation that the "Crusading Christian West, Marxist Communism, and World Jewry [work] against true Islam" (Zeidan, 2001, p.34). Preceding IS, Bin Laden's interventions continued this trend, recurrently referring to the "Judeo-crusading alliance" (alternatively the "Crusader-Zionist alliance," or the "Judeo-Christian coalition") and denouncing several times the "conspiracy between the Americans and their allies" (e.g. *Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of*

the Holy Sanctuaries). For Baines and O’Shaughnessy (2014), one of the three axes of Al-Qaeda’s “propaganda trinity” between 1998 and 2008 was a “persuasive narrative” best described as “The Big Lie”.

Most variants of the Salafi-jihadi conspiracy take a narrative form, with the unfolding of events leading to an end-point. As Zeidan (2001) emphasizes, the plot is articulated to an eschatological belief in a “cosmic battle” between good and evil that is prophesized to happen. Yet while past Salafi-jihadi groups located this end-point in a more or less distant future, IS has inventively taken the extra step in claiming that history was unfolding at present (read Laghmari 2019): it proclaimed the “caliphate” in June 2014 and repeatedly interpreted various events as those prophesized in Islamic eschatology (the Dabiq battle, the appearance of the anti-Messianic figure of the *Al-Masih ad-Dajjal*, etc.). As such, the group made a strong claim that all resources should be directed to the violent struggle immediately, that “real” Muslims should either emigrate to the “caliphate” or kill non-Muslims (*kafir*) without tergiversation and delay. This sense of urgency allows us to better understand the timing of the violence unleashed by the group, for example the usually rushed and unsophisticated nature of the attacks carried out by the group’s affiliates in the West.

Apart from its chronology, IS’ conspiratorial narrative largely follows the structure of its ideological predecessors, and is made of archetypal groups that are heavily indebted to the aforementioned classic distinction between “far enemies” and “near enemies”. As already highlighted by Baele and colleagues (2019), the “West” and the larger “crusaders” group does not only wage a direct war against Muslims, in particular killing their women and children; they also animate the conspiracy at a distance (the very term “crusader” serves an eternalizing function, suggesting that the plot has been going on for at least a thousand years). On the one hand, they spread secular ideas and sin among Muslim populations, and promote a “deviant” version of Islam that encourages Muslims to be “moderate” and thereby stay passive against their oppressors. Muslim clerics are corrupted *munafiqun* pretending to serve the group but deceitfully working for the powerful (hence the repeated label “imams of *kufri*)¹⁶ – a claim IS has accentuated to an unprecedented level. *Dabiq* #7 for example argues that “there is a slogan repeated continuously by apologetic du’at when flirting with the West and that is their statement: Islam is the religion of peace”. This state of affairs results in the constitution of a very large contaminated ingroup: Muslims living in a state of *jabiliyyah*, prevented through deception and lies to access true Islam. As *Dabiq* #12 claims, “countless Muslim youth in the West get themselves tangled into drugs, alcohol, gangs, promiscuity, and other vices and social illnesses over which any decent Muslim family would weep for its children.” In contrast, the “caliphate” is consistently presented as a

place where pure Islamic live takes place, and whose leaders take care of maintaining the purity of the ingroup by systematically exterminate those not pure enough (gay individuals, thieves, drug addicts, etc.).

On the other hand, “crusaders” also support Arab autocrats (typically named apostate – *murtadd* – or idolatrous – *taghut* – leaders or regimes), who are regularly qualified as the “puppets” or “lapdogs” of their “Western masters.” Assad, al-Sissi, the Jordan king, and others are a clique that “the West fawns over, protects, and is bribed by” (*Dabiq* #11), “enemies of the religion who work with a range of individuals to “execute the plans of the West and its puppets in the Gulf” (*Dabiq* #8). They should therefore be conceptualized either a traitor group (if they pretend to be Muslims, like Erdogan) or a close outgroup (if they present themselves as secular or Shi’a).¹⁷ IS’ publications regularly warn against – or report an execution of – “spies” working for these regimes within the “caliphate” to undermine it.

The clear blame attribution contained in this conspiratorial narrative offers strong incentives to engage in retributive violence and to target the various outgroups for different reasons and to different extents. For example, and in a way reminiscent to Nazis’ obsession with “inherited illnesses,” it explains IS’ extremely harsh treatment of a range of categories seemingly part of the Sunni ingroup but in fact presented as a contaminated group fundamentally undermining the ingroup’s purity (gays, drug addicts, alcoholics, etc. living in the “caliphate”) or as a traitor group (“fake” Islamic clerics). It also helps to make sense of IS’ strategic shifts in its targeting priorities (read Ingram, 2019), and its enunciation (and dynamic revisions) of the differentiated rules as to who it is permissible to kill in each group, where and how. Baele, Boyd and Coan (2019) have for instance shown that references to near and far enemies shift in importance over time as the group’s territorial retreat encourages them to incite violence abroad instead of encourage foreign individuals to join their ranks. In sum, while certainly attempting to provide a binary overarching worldview and using negative and dehumanizing labels to depict the “other,” IS’ messaging warrants an analysis that sheds light on the group’s multi-layered categorization structure and the conspiratorial narrative that unites the various archetypal groups involved.¹⁸

Conclusions

This paper sought to contribute to the crucial yet scattered literature dedicated to the identification of typical markers of what we could call violent language, i.e. the type of language mobilized by individuals or groups endorsing or participating in intergroup violence. Specifically, we attempted to build a more comprehensive characterization of such language that acknowledges the importance of the linguistic construction of in- and out-group identities yet situates these dynamics within complex blame-attributing worldviews displaying both a narrative and a conspiratorial

feature. Our paper put forward the concept of *conspiratorial narrative* to account for these heuristic constructs, and demonstrated the empirical relevance of such a theoretical addition when it comes to explaining the timing and differentiated levels of violence accompanying varying cases of violent language.

At this closing stage, two caveats are in order. First, we did not address – let alone solve – the question as to whether conspiratorial narratives are spread by people who believe in them or if they are disseminated instrumentally to appeal to individuals more likely to believe in them. While the literature goes both ways,¹⁹ our contribution does not provide the tools to take side. Second, we have not investigated the actual impact of conspiratorial narratives on audiences. This was not our intention; rather, our theoretical framework constitutes a necessary step towards such an examination, which will probably take the form of careful (methodologically as well as ethically) experimental tests varying the forms of identity categories being mobilized and the structure of the conspiratorial narrative accompanying them. This said, our framework can correct what is perhaps another limitation of more classic social-psychological approaches focusing solely on group categorization – their limited attention to the variety of individual responses to social categorization (e.g. Huddy, 2001). Our theoretical framework, by contrast, is compatible with a conceptualization of the audience as fundamentally composite and thus varyingly receptive to violent language. Indeed evidence exists in the literature on conspiracy theories that can shed light on individual receptiveness to conspiratorial narratives. Sociologically, research has for example shown that members of low socio-economic groups are more prone to conspiracy theorizing (Hofstadter, 1971; Mirowsky & Ross, 1983; Goertzel, 1994; Parsons et al., 1999; Stempel et al., 2007), but found not impact of education levels or ideology/partisanship (e.g. Goertzel, 1994; Uscinski et al., 2016). In terms of personality traits, belief in conspiracies is associated with belief in paranormal phenomena and powerful unseen forces (Swami et al., 2011; Darwin et al., 2011; Oliver & Wood, 2014). This line of research led Brotherton and colleagues (2013) to offer and test a scale measuring “individual differences in generic conspiracist ideation”, which could provide a baseline for the study of receptiveness to violent language. Even more importantly for the development of this research agenda, Oliver and Wood (2014) also shown that individuals who are attracted to Manichean narratives also tend to be enticed by conspiracy theories. Since other studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories is also dependent on exposure (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Radnitz & Underwood, 2015; van der Linden, 2015), and highlighted the expansion of “conspiracy entrepreneurs” who spread them intentionally (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008, p.9), a research agenda on the differentiated impact of conspiratorial narratives on radicalization or violence

makes sense. The appearance of conspiratorial narratives in mainstream politics in places such as Hungary, the US or Poland makes it even more pressing.²⁰

Tables & figures

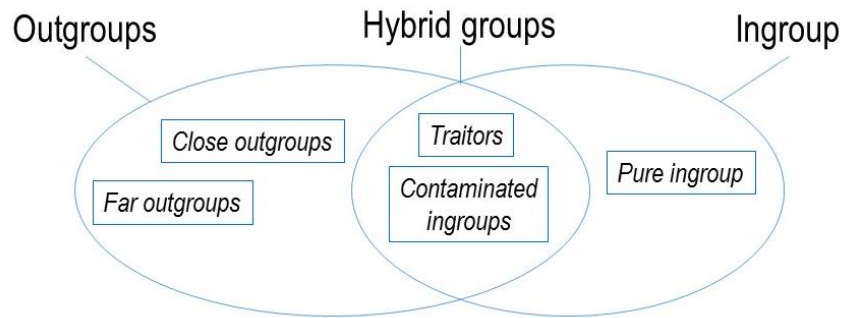


Figure 1: Archetypal groups in extremist conspiratorial narratives.

	Nazis	Hutu Power	Islamic State
Far outgroup	"World Jewry", elites in foreign powers, "plutocrats", "Bolsheviks".	Colonial powers especially Belgium, International organizations, Exiled "Tutsis" (RPF), Uganda.	"Crusaders", the "West".
Close outgroup	German Jews	Rwandans "Tutsis"	<i>Taghut</i> regimes in the Middle East
Traitors (hybrid group)	Non-Nazi Germans	"Hutus" helping "Tutsis"	"Fake" Islamic clerics, Shi'a Muslims, <i>munafiqun</i> .
Contaminated ingroup (hybrid group)	<i>Mischling</i> (several categories), Germans with "inherited illnesses".	"Hutus" believing in "Tutsis" and colonial powers' lies, "Hutus" victims of Belgian's sexual aggressions	Muslims living in <i>Jahiliyyah</i> , influenced by Western way of life and traitors
Ingroup	"Aryan" Germans	"Hutus"	IS-aligned Muslims

Table 1: Archetypal groups found in conspiratorial narratives (sorted from top to bottom according to their geographical and categorical proximity with the ingroup), and their instantiations in three cases of violent language.

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¹ Two prominent examples suffice: the Nuremberg trial found Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher guilty of Crimes against Humanity and sentenced him to death on the basis of his “incitement to murder and extermination”, even if he played no practical role in the genocide; Similarly, both the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and Rwandese *gacaca* courts charged several individuals involved in the extremist Hutu radio RTLMC and Kangura magazine with genocide, incitement to genocide, and crimes against humanity (for a summary see MacKinnon, 2009).

² In April 2019 alone three articles with the term “narrative” in their title have been published in the journal *Political Psychology*.

³ Read Clarke (2002) on conspiracy theories as promoting an extreme form of fundamental attribution error.

⁴ Our contribution complements here Fiske and Rai’s (2014) “virtuous violence” thesis.

⁵ See for instance <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/brexit-and-trump-voters-more-likely-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories-survey-study-shows>.

⁶ Available at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb72.htm>.

⁷ Available at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/kriegsziel.htm>.

⁸ “Parole 21: Den Juden kennen heißt den Sinn des Krieges verstehen!”, *Sprechabenddienst*, September-October 1944, available at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/sprech44a.htm>.

⁹ See Bytwerk’s discussion of Bareth and Vogel’s schoolbook *Heredity and Racial Science for Elementary and Secondary Schools*, available at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/erblehre.htm>.

¹⁰ This status is paradoxical given Belgium’s shift from a pro-Tutsi to a pro-Hutu stance after independence, by fear of Tutsi’s attraction to communist ideas. The Christian Democrats, for a long time Belgium’s ruling party, were for example favourable to the alignment of the Catholic Church with the Hutu regime, and the then Belgian king, Baudouin the 1st, was close to Habyarimana: he invited him to Brussels as late as October 1993 and encouraged Belgium’s government to support the Hutu regime in the early 1990s when Belgium distanced itself from it (read for example https://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/le-roi-baudouin-et-son-ami-rwandais-habyarimana/article-normal-865303.html?&cookie_check=1542717555). In fact, this inclusion of Belgians in the conspiratorial narrative truly arrived in this context of political shift – for a detailed analysis of the emergence of the “anti-Belgian”, read Belgian Senate 1997.

¹¹ As for example in RTLM 02.07.1994 (our translation): “these are fundamentally wicked people, a bad race. Could God help us exterminate them one day? This is why we all need to stand up to exterminate these bad individuals, that Inkotanyi race. [...] I am talking about the Inkotanyi race. They must disappear without any sort of trial.”

¹² Our translation from the French. This text is available at https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Kangura_No_6&gsearch.

¹³ As she notes elsewhere, “except for the Belgians who had been targeted over a long period by RTLM, most foreigners had not been even threatened, far less actually attacked” (Des Forges, 1999, p.470)

¹⁴ Read for example the long article on “the extinction of the grey zone” in issue #7 of the group’s English-speaking *Dabiq* magazine.

¹⁵ As Halverson, Goodall and Corman’s (2011, p.65) analysis of narratives in radical Islamism pertinently note, referring to the *munafiqun* character “provides fodder for both conspiracy theories and internal acts of violence”.

¹⁶ For example, *Dabiq* #14 investigates “the West’s very own imams of kufr”. Saudi-backed Wahhabi scholars are put in the same basket (*Dabiq* #13 for example clearly claims that “the palace scholars of the Saudi regime from their Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Shaykh to the minions who spread deceitful pro-taghut propaganda atop the pulpits of their kingdom are at the forefront”).

¹⁷ As recently shown by Baele, Boyd and Coan (2019), IS strengthens perceptions of a global conspiracy not only through language but also through visual imagery.

¹⁸ It is striking to observe that members of the “counter-jihad” “spectrum” (Archer 2008) or nebula (Lee 2015), Anders Breivik *primus inter pares*, believe in a conspiratorial narrative that is the exact mirror of IS’. Studies from Fekete (2011), Berntzen and Sandberg (2014), or Ekman (2015) have depicted their belief in a grand unseen plot where Muslims not only engage in violent crimes in Europe but also corrupt white elites by promoting tolerance and multiculturalism. “Muslims”, as Fekete (2011: 31) explains, “supported by liberals, cultural relativists and Marxists, are out to Islamicise Europe and that there is a conspiracy to impose multiculturalism on the continent and destroy western civilisation”. Berntzen and Sandberg (2014: 762) similarly characterize this worldview as a “conspiracy theory [that] claims that the political and cultural elites have entered into a secret partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, and that this collusion has been in effect for decades”. The white counter-jihad vanguard is credited with uncovering the

plot and explaining its dynamics to the masses fooled by Muslims' "dhimmitude" and White elites' "camouflage" and alienated by efforts to enforce "political correctness" (e.g. Ekman 2015: 1996). Interestingly, Breivik's "compendium", which intends "to open the reader's eyes" to the "Islamisation of Europe" with an "analysis of Islam which is unknown to a majority of Europeans", contains a typology of the various actors guilty of "closing of civilization" and fomenting the "extinction of Nordic genotype", including a range of traitors ("categories A, B and C of traitors").

¹⁹ The instrumental approach is dominant approach in political science (e.g. Fearon & Laitin, 2000), while the literature in psychology and terrorism studies tends to explain violent behavior as resulting from a need for cognitive closure or certain psychological traits (e.g. Victoroff, 2005).

²⁰ As *New York Times* editorialist R. Cohen observes, "Hungary and Poland are turning the clock back to Europe's darkest hours. Today they are all about erecting borders — real and imagined — against Islam, migrants and refugees, Jews, the European Union, the United Nations, Soros and what they portray as a pluralistic international conspiracy." ("How Democracy Became the Enemy", *New York Times*, 6 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/sunday/orban-hungary-kaczynski-poland.html>).