

Luc Boltanski

Reality and its twin: The thematic of conspiracy in political metaphysics

2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12640>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Buch / book

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Boltanski, Luc: *Reality and its twin: The thematic of conspiracy in political metaphysics*. Siegen: Universität Siegen: SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation 2019 (SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation – Working Paper Series 7). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12640>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/41>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>



MEDIEN DER
KOOPERATION



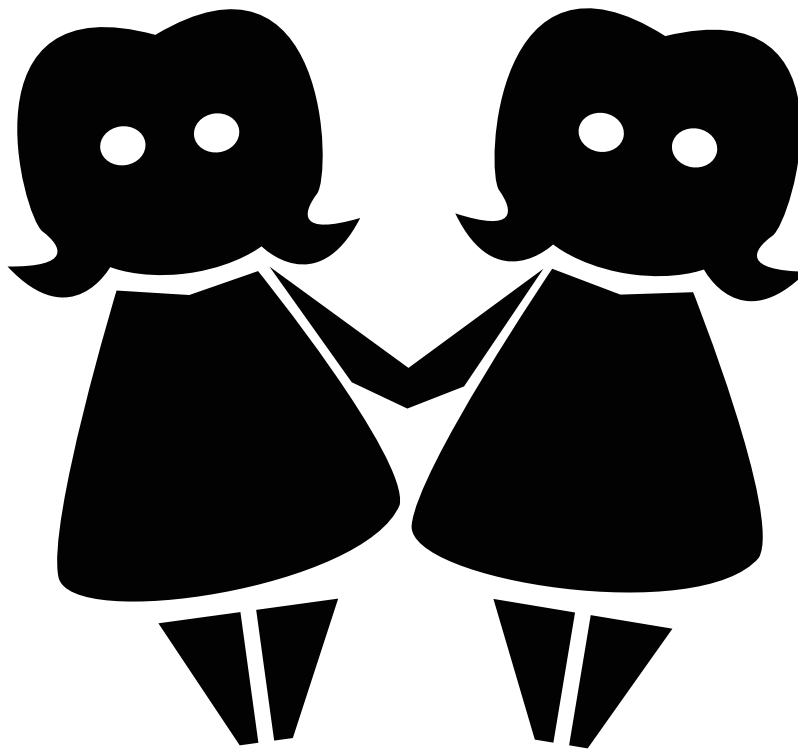
UNIVERSITÄT
SIEGEN



Reality and its twin:

The thematic of conspiracy in political metaphysics

Luc Boltanski *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris*



WORKING PAPER SERIES | NO. 7 | JUNE 2019

Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation
Sonderforschungsbereich 1187 Medien der Kooperation

Working Paper Series
Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation

Print-ISSN 2567-2509

Online-ISSN 2567-2517

URN urn:nbn:de:hbz:467-13903



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Publication of the series is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

This Working Paper Series is edited by the Collaborative Research Center Media of Cooperation and serves as a platform to circulate work in progress or preprints in order to encourage the exchange of ideas. Please contact the authors if you have any questions or comments. Copyright remains with the authors.

Aus dem Französischen von Clare Ferguson.
Cover image from Freepik, made by www.flaticon.com.

The Working Papers are accessible via the website <http://wp-series.mediacoop.uni-siegen.de> or can be ordered in print by sending an email to workingpaperseries@sfb1187.uni-siegen.de

Universität Siegen
SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation
Herrengarten 3
57072 Siegen, Germany
www.sfb1187.uni-siegen.de
workingpaperseries@sfb1187.uni-siegen.de

This paper was produced within the scope of a Mercator fellowship at the University of Siegen. I thank the members of the Collaborative Research Centre 'Media of Cooperation' for the stimulating discussions and productive dialogue. Furthermore, I am grateful to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for the funding that made the research, analysis and writing-up of this paper possible.

Reality and its twin:

The thematic of conspiracy in political metaphysics

Luc Boltanski *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris* — boltanski@ehess.fr

Mysteries, conspiracies and inquiries

This paper will focus on the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry, a subject area explored in one of my more recent books, where I sought to understand the prominent place these thematics have occupied in the representation of reality since around the turn of the 20th century. It has also long been my aim to analyse the role that these thematics may have played in the formation of political metaphysics. Although not necessarily one of the canonical forms of political philosophy, political metaphysics left its mark on the last century and, in all probability, continues to haunt the present one. It can be seen as a kind of mythology that is equipped with a formidable practical effectiveness, which gives it the power to shape the contours of reality. The thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry have constantly flipped back and forth between the representation of reality in literature, particularly in so-called 'popular' literature, and the most disturbing and sometimes most dramatic aspects of reality itself. As Borges wrote (with irony) in 'The theme of the traitor and the hero' (published in 1944): 'The idea that history might have copied history is mind-boggling enough; that history should copy *literature* is inconceivable'.¹ To fathom this fuzzy area, which might metaphorically be called the twilight zone of twentieth-century Europe, we have to be able to understand and trace these interactions between literature, political metaphysics and reality.

I should begin by pointing out that my interest in the literary expressions of the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry has been sparked (as will become clearer later) by reflections in the social sciences and in sociology in particular, which is where my main research activity lies. Sociology and the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry have been

linked in many ways from the outset. For example, sociology adopted inquiry as its main investigative tool. It has also been seen as a means of shedding light on the obscure and paradoxical aspects of social life, or on its mysteries, if you like. Moreover, sociology has constantly come up against the question of conspiracy, particularly when examining the nature of collectives and attempting to reinforce the distinction between, on the one hand, social ties that are considered 'normal' and legitimate and, on the other, forms of pathological or threatening associations. My hypothesis here will therefore be that there are analogies between the development of sociology and the development of crime and spy literature. These two apparently very different ways of considering social life could thus, in a way, be approached as two expressions of the same concern that emerged at the turn of the 20th century regarding the very content of reality. With the concomitant identification of a new pathological entity called paranoia, this concern was also clearly manifesting in the field of psychiatry. The doctors who initially proposed a characterisation of this condition considered the fundamental symptoms to be a belief in the existence of large-scale conspiracies and the development of endless inquiries aimed at uncovering them.

To conduct an analysis of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry, I therefore focused first on representative works from two literary genres aimed at a broad audience that have featured these three thematics, namely crime and spy fiction, understood here in the forms in which they originally appeared, that is, from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th centuries. (The works analysed included, for the crime novel genre, Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes and George Simenon's stories about detective superintendent Maigret and, for the spy genre, the novel that established its canons, John Buchan's 1915 *The Thirty-Nine Steps*). Developing the thematics of mystery, inquiry (both of which are at the heart of the crime novel) and conspiracy (the central focus of spy novels), I began to tackle

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 144 (Translated from Spanish by Andrew Hurley).

questions that concerned not just the representation of reality in popular literature but also the new ways of problematising reality that accompanied the development of the human and social sciences.

The different strands of this human and social sciences study were developed in three fields in particular. The first was psychiatry, which invented a new nosological entity at the beginning of the 20th century called paranoia. One of the main symptoms of this condition is the tendency to engage in endless inquiries to the point of delirium. The second field was political science, which seized on the problematic of paranoia and shifted it from the psychological to the social. The focus of political science has been on conspiracy and the tendency to explain historical events in terms of conspiracy theories. The third field considered was that of sociology, looking in particular at the problems it encounters when it adopts specific forms of so-called social causality and when it undertakes to identify the individual or collective entities to which events in the lives of individuals, groups or the course of history can be attributed.

The connection between these apparently disparate strands was established using an analytical framework. I will now present some of its elements. This framework sought to define the social and political context at the turn of the 20th century in which the thematics of mystery and conspiracy became tropes, destined to play a leading role not only in the field of fiction but also in the interpretation of historical events and the way in which societies functioned. I will propose a thesis that links questions relating to the representation of reality with changes that affected the way in which reality itself was established during the period in question. The relationship between reality and the state was central to these analyses. A mystery can only be established as a specific object when it stands out against a background of stabilised and predictable reality, whose fragility is only revealed by a crime. The nation-state, as it developed at the end of the 19th century, took on the role of organising and unifying, or *constructing* (as contemporary sociologists would say), reality for a given population in a given territory. However, this truly demiurgic project had to overcome many obstacles, not least the development of capitalism, which pays no heed to national borders.

The thematic of conspiracy focuses suspicions concerning the exercise of power. Where does the power really lie? Who *really* holds the power? Is it the state authorities, who are the forces supposed to take charge of it? Or other bodies acting in the shadows, such as the bankers, anarchists, secret societies or the ruling class? This is how political ontologies based on a distributed reality are constructed. On the one hand, there is the surface reality, visible but undoubtedly illusory despite its official status. On the other, there is the deep, hidden, threatening, unof-

ficial but much more real reality. The contingencies generated by the conflict between these two realities—REALITY vs *reality*—are the guiding principle of my work. They have been deployed in different ways in a process similar to that developed two decades ago by Wolf Lepenies in his influential work on the relationship between what he called *the three cultures*, that is, the sciences, the novel and the social sciences. The very rapid appearance and development of the crime and spy genres, the identification of paranoia by psychiatry and the development of the social sciences and of sociology in particular—three almost simultaneous processes—are thus thought to have interacted in a new way to problematise reality and work through its inherent contradictions.

Crime and spy novels have arguably been the main conduit for opening concerns up to public scrutiny on a large scale. Because these concerns went to the heart of political systems and challenged the very contours of modernity, it would not really have been possible to have tackled them head on (outside of a few restricted circles). Instead, any uncertainties regarding what might be called *the reality of reality*, precisely because they were crucial, found themselves diverted towards ‘the imaginary’.

It is now generally accepted that crime and spy novels are among the main twentieth-century innovations in the field of fiction. These two genres appeared suddenly in French and English literature in the period from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries and became very popular very quickly. Initially classed as so-called popular literature, these narrative forms, which were organised around the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry, soon extended to more ambitious forms of literature, which adopted their characteristic themes. The rapid emergence and development of these genres was not exclusive to Western literature. Crime and spy narratives, which have proliferated since the beginning of the 20th century first in written form and then through film and television, are now the most widespread narrative forms globally. As such, they play an unrivalled role in representing a reality that is presented to every human being on the planet. In this sense, these narratives are the objects of choice for a sociological approach that has moved away from strictly documentary analyses to recapture some of the symbolic forms and more especially the political thematics that developed over the 20th century. This is not unlike history’s and philosophy’s uses of Homer’s poems to analyse the symbolic structures of Ancient Greece or of classical tragedy to explore the representations of power in France during the grand siècle.

What is meant by ‘mystery’

To briefly describe the thematic of mystery, I will draw on a story entitled ‘The Blue Cross’, the first in *The Innocence of Father Brown* collection of narratives, which is itself the first of five collections of crime stories written by G.K. Chesterton and published between 1911 and 1935.² ‘The Blue Cross’ opens with a French detective, Aristide Valentin, arriving in England to track down Flambeau, a brilliant criminal who is wanted by the police in at least three major European countries. However, Valentin has no leads. He therefore adopts an approach that consists in paying very close attention to extremely minor events, which, on the surface of it, do not make any sense. Because of this, they manifest as *mysteries*. For example, in the restaurant where he has his breakfast, the sugar bowl is filled with salt and the salt shaker with sugar, and in the stall outside a greengrocer’s, there is a card placed on top of a pile of oranges reading ‘Finest Brazil nuts’ and another on top of a pile of nuts reading ‘Best tangerine oranges’.

This depiction of Aristide Valentin roaming the streets of London and being guided by a series of *mysteries* gives us an initial indication of what we should understand by this term. A *mystery* is created by an event, however unimportant it may seem, that becomes salient because it stands out against a *background*—to borrow a term from Gestalt psychology—or because the narrator can see its traces left behind in the fabric of a situation. The background against which the mystery stands out is made up of everyday configurations that have become known to us through the mediation of authorities (notably educational) and/or through experience. Experience provides a relatively predictable framework for action, particularly when it associates everyday configurations with habits. A mystery is therefore a singularity (since every event is singular) that is *abnormal* in nature. It contrasts sharply with the way in which things present themselves under supposedly *normal* conditions with the result that the mind cannot situate this disquieting strangeness within the sphere of reality. As such, it leaves a small tear in the seamless fabric of reality. In this sense, drawing on concepts introduced in my previous book, *On Critique*, we can say that a mystery results from the *world* irrupting into *reality*.³

By ‘world’ here, I mean ‘everything that happens’—to use Wittgenstein’s expression—and everything that could happen, which references the impossibility of ever fully knowing or mastering

the world. Conversely, reality is stabilised by pre-established formats that are supported by institutions, which are often legal or paralegal in nature, at least in Western societies. These formats compose a semantics that is tasked with stating *the whatness of what is*. They establish *qualifications*, define *entities* and *tests* (in the sense that the term is used in *On Justification*,⁴ the book I co-wrote with Laurent Thévenot) and determine the relationships that entities and tests must maintain to be acceptable. Reality thus presents itself as a network of causal relationships that bind together the events with which experience is confronted. Referencing these relationships allows us to *give meaning* to *events* by determining which *entities* they should be *attributed* to (the term ‘attribution’ is used here in the sense of the *theory of attribution*, which was initially formulated in the field of social psychology and then incorporated into cognitive research).

These causal relationships are thus tacitly recognised as being generally unproblematic. As such, there seems to be no need to verify or prove them, or at least it does not seem necessary to push the inquiry beyond the boundaries that have been set out of habit and out of trust in the validity of the established formats. This trust is based on the fact that the authorities guarantee that events are consistently attributed to predefined entities, particularly when causality has a social dimension. In the modern age, legal and state authorities play a leading role in this respect. The law can be considered one of the main social mechanisms used to establish and maintain these attributions.

Unlike events that can be described as ordinary, an event is mysterious when it defies the normal attributions of a specific entity (there is no valid reason for a waiter to put sugar in the salt shaker) or when the nature of the entity to which it can be attributed is unknown. A mysterious event may well have an immediate *signification* (such-and-such a building has collapsed) in the sense that the change of state that affects the situation in which the event has occurred may be described using generally accepted physical data (if the building had risen into the sky, it would have been called a ‘miracle’). However, we can say that an event has no *meaning* until it has been *attributed* to a specific entity or, where the entity is already known, until its *intentions* have been determined. Hence, an event, as a singularity, only takes on its full meaning when related to an entity that is credited with an identity, a certain intertemporal stability and an intentionality, regardless of whether or not this intentionality manifests

² G.K. Chesterton, *Father Brown Stories*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.

³ Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011, pp. 57–59.

⁴ Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

through a conscious act. Such-and-such a building has collapsed. That is a ‘fact’. To give the event meaning, however, we need to be able to determine the entity to which it can be attributed and the reasons behind it. Did the building collapse due to an earthquake? Or due to a construction defect caused by the architect (who, for example, recommended the use of inferior materials to save money)? Or was it caused by some illegal manoeuvring by the owner to collect on the insurance? Or a criminal covering up a murder he had just committed? Or was it a bomb planted by a terrorist (and, in this case, what were their real intentions, and should they even be called a ‘terrorist’)? And so on.

The constitution of reality

With regard to specifying the conditions for the emergence of the crime novel, I will propose a first hypothesis. The appearance of this novelistic genre was conditional on the possibility of establishing something that was likely to be seen as *reality*. As such, the crime novel stood out clearly from two genres that had preceded and/or accompanied it, namely the ‘fantastique’⁵ story, which was based on the intervention of supernatural beings or on the world being invaded by strange creatures, and the picaresque novel, where, as Pavel wrote, ‘the adventures are juxtaposed with no causal relationships’ in a world with ‘nothing to offer but chance’ and where ‘fragmentation and contingency prevails’.⁶

Unlike the ‘fantastique’ story and the picaresque novel, the crime novel relied on reality *per se*, that is, on *something* that could serve as a substrate for the different situations encountered in the action, independently of the so-called *subjective* interpretations developed by the actors. The elements that made up this reality were assumed to be in a stable relationship with one another and to form a relatively coherent whole, making a descriptive overview possible. It was only against this background of reality, which was accepted as self-evident, that a mystery could stand out and capture the reader’s attention.

In the original crime novel, this background of reality was based on two clearly separate but interacting orders, which had only relatively recently been established as such. One was *physical reality*. The

first analyses—conducted in France by Messac⁷ and in Germany by Kracauer⁸—generated by this genre very pertinently focused on the relationship between the appearance of crime fiction and the development of science and technology. The second and one might say more important order was *social reality*.

By this term, I mean a draft description of the human environment as an organised whole possessing a specific logic and obeying its own laws, independently of the motives and wishes of each individual. This whole is composed of very diverse individuals and entities, some of which are legally defined (for example, members of the bar) and others that are not (for example, the social classes). Finally, these entities generally have properties, a kind of intentionality and a way of being or a specific character that is broadly reflected in the ways of being and characters of individuals who can be linked with these entities through some of their properties. Hence, for example, there is a way of being in the bourgeoisie, and anyone with prior knowledge of this will expect certain behaviours when in the presence of a member of the bourgeoisie.

The combination of properties derived from legal specifications—which can be described as statutory or *official*—and properties identified by taking into account non-legal, *unofficial* and strictly *social* entities, as it were, is problematic and full of uncertainties. For example, some individuals may have a way of being that does not fit with their official identity. We discover this way of being—often to our astonishment—before we understand that their peculiar character stems from their links to non-legally defined entities (we did not know, for example, that such-and-such a doctor was of ‘foreign’ or ‘working-class’ origin, but now we do ..., of course ..., everything becomes clear).

The idea that such an ‘objective’ description, which is capable of shifting from physical reality to social reality (and also, as the science historian Daston showed, from law-governed social reality to physical reality⁹), is not only possible but also essential for the harmonious functioning of political entities emerged—as we know—at the turn of the 19th century. It was accompanied by the development of statistics, political economy and then latterly, just

⁵ This term now refers to a substantial French literary and cinematic genre that is characterised by works that step outside reality, for example, by centring on dreams, the supernatural, magic, fear or science fiction.

⁶ Thomas Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel: A History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013. Quotations translated from French (*La pensée du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, pp. 101 and 106).

⁷ Régis Messac, *Le ‘Detective Novel’ et l’influence de la pensée scientifique*, Paris, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman. Ein philosophischer Traktat*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1979. This text, which remained unpublished for a long time, was written between 1922 and 1925 and is dedicated to Theodor Adorno.

⁹ See Lorraine Daston, ‘Objectivity and the escape from perspective’, *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 22, 1992, pp. 597–618.

before the appearance of the first crime fiction, sociology. This was the intellectual context in which the social novel took shape as it drew on these new ways of looking at the human environment. The genre enjoyed extraordinary popularity during the 19th century, and the crime novel appeared subsequently as a partial transformation of this genre.

In the social novel, the crime as an event is an attribute of the criminal as its cause. Event and cause are inseparable. The questions raised by the crime and the criminal are therefore essentially moral ones. If we know the social conditions that have turned someone into a criminal, are we entitled to hold them morally responsible for their crime, or should responsibility for it also be attributed to this entity we call 'society'? The innovation that crime fiction introduced as it emerged from social fiction, however, was precisely the relationship between the crime and the criminal. An event occurs. It's a crime. But we don't know who to attribute it to. Any one of the characters presented in the novel could be the perpetrator, including the narrator (as in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which is analysed in Pierre Bayard's excellent book *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*)

Both the crime and the spy novels deploy characters that are more archetypal and a reality that is more mundane than those ever to be found in the social novel. However, this banalisation of reality serves as a prop for the unfolding crisis, which reveals the uncertain and fragile nature of reality through a criminal event whose attribution is problematic. No one is free from suspicion. The spy novel goes one step further because behind each character, no matter how ordinary, there may be another person with totally different properties, dispositions and intentions. Moreover, their social appearance is especially archetypal since it is merely a disguise intended to deceive both the other characters and the reader. As the characters' real identities become uncertain and problematic, so do the real relationships between them because certain apparent relationships actually conceal secret connections, intentions and plans.

Reality in crisis: conspiracy and inquiry forms

This deliberate, processual layering of identities characterises the structure of what might be called the *conspiracy form*. The conspiracy form is necessarily double-sided. A conspiracy is an object that does not contain its own intelligibility. It can only be distinguished from ordinary relationships through the *unveiling* process, which brings together on the same level the apparent but fictitious reality and the hidden but real reality. That is why the moment when the conspiracy is exposed has all the properties of a coup de théâtre.

Hence, reality, or social reality, as it is initially presented to the naive observer (and reader) with all its order, hierarchies, determinations and principles of causality is flipped over to reveal not only its fictional nature but also another, much realer, concealed reality, which is inhabited by things, acts, actors, plans, connections and above all powers whose existence no one had suspected or even thought possible. The question of the powers and hence of the causal determinations that forge reality, set it in motion and give it its usual contours is of primary importance here. In the crime novel, the detective's unveiling reveals that even, or especially, those who were supposed to embody reality and who had the necessary powers to ensure reality was transmitted and respected are, or could be, criminals. In the spy novel, suspicion falls first and foremost on the people in power. The unveiling process reveals that these apparently legitimate holders of political power, whether willingly or unwittingly, are—in reality—mere puppets for other forces whose power is much greater but hidden.

In both crime and spy novels, the unveiling comes at the end of an inquiry. The question raised by the *inquiry form* mainly concerns the limits of the inquiry. The principal advantage of surface reality, as defined above, is that it reduces uncertainty about *the whatness of what is* and thus limits the number and scale of inquiries needed to orient action in the course of our everyday lives. By aligning ourselves with reality, it is possible to form reasonable expectations and to attribute intentions to other entities and particularly other individuals that correspond to their 'role'—as classical sociologists would say—in the situation in which we encounter them (I would thus attribute to a taxi driver the intention of driving me to the address I have indicated to him and not that of driving me to some remote spot to deliver me into the hands of criminals). Relying on reality is more economical than suspecting or questioning it. An inquiry, on the other hand, as well as interrupting the course of action, presupposes taking costly measures because it involves searching in spaces (in *the world*) that have not been mapped out or reconnoitred for the elements that must be taken into account to orient action. The inquiry process is not absent from everyday situations, but the inquiries conducted are generally not very extensive. Those who undertake them are not seeking to accumulate irrefutable evidence but rather just to arrive at likely presumptions that are sufficient to orient action.

In contrast to these ordinary routines, the original crime novel presented situations in which the inquiry was extended to its most extreme limits. Anything—a footprint, a trampled blade of grass, a five-minute time difference between two witness accounts—could be used as a clue or evidence. Never before had such unremitting, meticulous and extraordinary inquiries been described in fiction. No

doubt the same could be said of sociology, albeit its means of providing evidence are very different because they have mainly been based on statistics since the end of the 19th century, as we can see, for example, in Durkheim's *Suicide*.

I want to briefly draw your attention to another indication of this new focus on the inquiry. As previously mentioned, the development of the crime novel was concomitant with an important innovation in the field of psychiatry, namely the identification and description by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin in 1899 of a new mental illness called paranoia. According to Kraepelin, one of the morbid characteristics that people suffering from this condition present with is that, in the ordinary circumstances of life, they extend an inquiry beyond what would be considered reasonable, as if the contours and content of reality are always problematic for them. As such, the investigators in crime novels, while of sound mind, behave like they are paranoid.

I put forward the idea that this emphasis on inquiry was one of the external forms of a more general and more profound anxiety that focused on reality itself. On the one hand, reality had probably never been presented in such an organised, robust and hence predictable manner as it was in modern Western societies. On the other, and perhaps for the same reasons, its fragility—or at least what was thought to be its fragility—suddenly came to the fore and seemed to arouse unprecedented anxiety. I think that it is this anxiety that is dramatised in the crime novel, and I believe that the main reason for this genre's success lies in the artistry with which it reflects this anxiety about *the reality of reality*.

Reality and the nation-state

This anxiety about the content of reality is even more evident in the spy novel, whose development two or three decades after the appearance of the crime novel clearly oriented it towards the question of the nature of the state. We can assume nevertheless that the question of the state, or rather the question of its relationship with reality, was already implicit in the crime novel. After all, one of the characteristics of the crime genre is to situate the action within a very specific time frame that sees individuals from civil society and state representatives immersed in the same situation, where the circumstances of the drama mean that the private lives of ordinary people positioned as *suspects* can be scrutinised in minute detail. One of the specific features of the crime genre is therefore that it looks at things from a particular standpoint where the lines are blurred between the private and the public, between civil society and the state and, more radically still, between two manifestations of reality. On the one hand, there is the *real*,

in other words the lived experience of individual actors in the diversity of everyday situations. On the other, there is *reality* as a unified whole, which is supported by institutions that determine its contours and which is based on a framework of formats, rules, procedures, knowledge and tests that purport to be generally applicable. Towards the end of the 19th century in Europe, these institutions became systemic in nature both because they were more firmly integrated under the authority of the state and because they were unified through their common reference to science and technology, with the social sciences, particularly economics and statistics, playing a significant role.

By drawing on the sciences, education and social research, the state project that developed in the last three decades of the 19th century aimed, implicitly at least, to close the gap between lived reality and instituted reality, between *subjectivities* and the objective mechanisms that framed them. It was as if closing this gap was inherent in the very idea of the nation-state. In this political utopia, the entire meaning of the project was concentrated in the hyphen connecting nation and state. It bound together in one indissociable synthesis, on the one hand, the lived reality of individuals whose diversity was absorbed by the fact that they belonged to the same nation with all its customs and so-called 'national' character, which was represented as belonging to the natural order, in other words, as being-in-itself, and, on the other, the state, an agency of reflexivity, control and governance that ensured the organisation, stability, security and consciousness of this natural order through its institutions, in other words, its transformation into a being-for-itself. Recent studies, particularly those of Foucault, have highlighted the difference between this new conception of the state as a nation-state and that of the sovereign state, as it was established in Europe at the end of the Wars of Religion. The state could now be described as a social state. It was no longer conceived solely as a higher-order power—that was relatively free from religious quarrels and subject to its own morality (the reason of state)—just to ensure its security as effectively as possible. It also aimed to know, control and, to a certain extent, *organise* the reality within which the populations under its authority lived their lives. It even proposed to provide them with education and to put in place, as far as possible, the measures necessary for their wellbeing.

Taking social reality—conceptualised according to the model of physical reality—into account gave substance to this utopian synthesis between state and nation. The state became the organiser and guarantor of reality as it was both lived and instituted, that is, it was seen as both already in existence and as requiring additional effort to bring it into existence. This essentially demiurgic form of the state

project—to which we can attribute the Foucauldian term *biopolitics* and which culminated in the welfare state—would have been completely implausible had it not been based on the sciences and on their close relationship with the state. This convergence between the state project and the scientific project established and stabilised a reality that was envisaged as a composition, on the one hand, of physical laws, technologies and economic and social laws and, on the other, of the laws passed by parliament, ministerial decrees, policing measures and, more generally, the legal instruments and social technologies for representation and governance. Statistics played an essential role in this structure. Defined at the outset as a science intended to describe the state (as its name suggests), statistics was able to serve as a go-between between physical reality and social reality on account of its mathematisation.¹⁰ Sociology, again as its name suggests, focuses on *society*, a composite of populations, objects and rules (both official, such as laws, and unofficial, such as norms) contained within the boundaries of a nation state. It has been shown that the different strands of sociology that developed at the end of the 19th century, although not necessarily nationalist-inspired, incorporated into their problematics—and often universalised—the specific problems that the construction or expansion of the nation-state form posed in the various European countries in which this discipline emerged.

Taking into account the relationship that was developing in Europe at the turn of the 20th century between the construction of the nation-state and the determination and stabilisation of reality allows us to get to the heart of what the crime novel and the spy novel signified. The principle behind the anxiety that was dramatised in these literary genres and which was thus aroused in readers to produce a specific kind of excitement called *suspense* was that it allowed a questioning of *the reality of reality*. G. K. Chesterton, who had the combined mindset of a metaphysician and theologian, can be considered the first to have suggested there might be a strictly metaphysical dimension to the crime novel (as we can see particularly clearly in *The Man who was Thursday*). First, this genre, which centred on the crime scene, presented the question of values and the opposition of good and evil. Second, imbued with the thrill of the inquiry process, it drew on science for its approach and methods. Third, by addressing the issue of responsibility, it joined the emerging discipline of psychoanalysis in questioning the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary

and the involuntary. Finally and most importantly, it unquestionably reopened inquiries into unity and multiplicity and order and disorder, in other words, into the old ontological question of reality.

In the crime novel during the period in question, the state, as the body responsible for reality, was subjected to something approaching a *test* (in the sense that Thévenot and I used this concept in *On Justification*), and the empirical test that unfolded in these narratives, pitting the investigator against the criminal, was only one concrete manifestation of this. This test, considered in its political metaphysical dimension, was not initiated by either a murder—which was not a necessary component of the crime narrative—or a crime. The state form was defined by its mission to establish order with a view to dealing with disorder and transgression, or rather by its mission to establish an order that had the power to determine what it excluded in terms of transgressive disorder. The history of the state form is thus indissociable from the history of the principles of order, which the state claimed to represent, and the history of transgressions, which the state sought to punish. I should add here that the field of popular literature did not wait until the emergence of the crime novel to conquer a wide audience with its accounts of criminal exploits and the miseries of their perpetrators.

The test that the state faced in the crime novel was a *mystery* inasmuch as it was an anomaly of reality. Reality, which the state was supposed to act as guarantor for, was not called into question by the fact that criminals existed, which was in a way the very justification for establishing political order, but by the uncertainty concerning the circumstances of the crime and particularly by the scope of its attribution, since any character, however irreproachable they may seem, could be the perpetrator. The reality presented in the crime novel is suspicious in every respect, both material and human, physical and social. The very possibility of deploying such a generalised, almost absolute suspicion—and doing so both with plausibility and based on a realistic description of reality—in the most mundane, everyday contexts was in itself a test of the nation-state. In other words, it was a test of the state's claim not only to maintain order but primarily to make any events that fell within the scope of the possible intelligible and, to a certain extent, predictable.

I should also stress that there was no intention here to challenge the legitimacy of the state or public authority. The original crime novel and more especially the original spy novel were devoid of any critical orientation (social and political criticism did not appear in these literary genres until the 1930s). Their aim was not to question but rather to *exploit* the anxieties, tensions and contradictions that inhabited the relationships between the political order and reality and between lived reality and the formats or

¹⁰ See Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1998 (Translated from French by Camille Naish).

frameworks that grounded reality when considered from a general point of view. Anxieties and tensions are no doubt inherent in any political order and in any experience of reality. I refer you to Lévi-Strauss's argument here in which he shows how myths exploit contradictions—to which they offer no solution, not even in dialectic terms—to give those individuals grappling with a contradiction the means to come to terms with it, or to 'deal with' it, if you like, with the result that, in a way, they then become accustomed or resigned to it.¹¹

However, these anxieties and tensions took on a specific form when, in the context of the rise of the European nation-states and the development of the natural and social sciences, the possibility emerged of bringing together different dimensions of reality—physical, geographical, economic, social, historical, legal—and integrating them into a global political form. Each time reality manifested through its fragility, inconsistencies and contradictions, the anxieties that inevitably arose as a consequence were thus focused on the nation-state as the author of this political form. It is therefore not surprising that these unprecedented historical circumstances saw the emergence of relatively new symbolic forms that were capable of addressing the tensions and anxieties they generated. Anxiety, which was periodically brought to fever pitch (since nothing could be taken for granted anymore and the whole of reality had been thrown into crisis), was then assuaged by restoring order. However, the hyper-rational and quasi-magical nature of this order served to perpetuate people's suspicion that there might be another possible outcome, namely that reality would descend into permanent chaos.

Capitalism and the nation-state

Among the many tensions reflected in the crime and spy novels (too numerous to list here), I will focus on the relationship between the development of the nation-state and the concomitant development of capitalism. This relationship is revealed in the crime novel and the spy novel in different ways. The crime novel, because it grappled with reality in a local environment, encountered it in the form of a tension between, on the one hand, the deeply unequal social classes that made up the nation and, on the other, an

impartial, all-seeing state in the form of this representative of the administration that was the police officer.

In the case of the spy novel, the tension between the nation-state and capitalism—particularly financial capitalism—was even more pronounced because the genre directly addressed the question of the relationship between state, nation and the forces that threatened them. At the heart of the original spy novel, there was a tension between two logics. On the one hand, there was the logic of *territory*, a unified space delimited by borders containing a homogeneous population that the state was designed to protect. On the other, there was the logic of *population flows*, which, unbeknown to the legitimate inhabitants and without the state being able to prevent them, crossed the territory and put it at risk. These flows were heterogeneous in composition. They could be made up of political agents, such as anarchists, socialists, activists, terrorists or spies sent by other powers, or they could be directly linked to the workings of capitalism, for example, flows of workers or goods or the frequent financial flows manipulated by the banks. While the banks might be located within the territory of a nation-state and the bankers might have citizenship of that nation-state, the scope of their activity was borderless. This is why Jews were so often seen in the original spy novel as the enemy within. They were considered in this literature to be intrinsically stateless, and they were moreover the recruitment pool of choice when it came to revolutionaries and bankers. As for the flow of *cash*, it was both the instrument and symbol of corruption because, on the one hand, its transmutation into national currency through the magic of a foreign *exchange* transaction concealed its provenance and, on the other, it changed hands without leaving a trace.

This permanent degradation of the purity and transparency of the territory by the invisible flows that passed through it tended to blur people's access to reality. It became impossible to know with certainty whether the apparently affable stranger who was introducing themselves was actually who they claimed to be. Similarly, the reader did not know whether the comfortable, spacious residence that the novel's protagonist had taken refuge in was really a hunting lodge or whether hidden in its bowels was a small fort used as a hideout by the enemy. Nothing was certain. Not people's identities, nor their intentions nor the way in which things were presented. Nothing.

What was presented as real was suspected not to be real. It was seen rather as just what was being presented intentionally to deceive. This constant questioning can be seen as the manifestation in the crime and/or spy novel of a more general anxiety relating to the relationship between the nation-state and capitalism. One of the fundamental experiences that ac-

¹¹ We know that for Lévi-Strauss, the myth provided a logical model for deploying and, in a way, absorbing a contradiction, particularly by immersing it in a network of mediations. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man: Mythologiques Volume Four*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990 (particularly the 'Finale', p. 625) (Translated from French by John and Doreen Weightman).

accompanied the rise of capitalism and which shaped subjectivities during the 19th century was the volatility of the fortunes that were linked to the vagaries of finance, particularly the stock markets. Anybody could become a millionaire in just a few days—or hours even—and could be showered with honours and even given a title. The wealthy descendant of an old aristocratic family, on the other hand, could see their fortune disappear overnight, as if by magic, because the share price of some risky enterprise or other that they had invested their fortune in had mysteriously collapsed. While these reversals of fortune were marginal—their representation in the literature was based on a few cases widely commented on in the press—in relation to the overwhelming stability of the long-term distribution of capital, they nevertheless flooded the literature of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. This plasticity of wealth and social positions was seen as scandalous not only in terms of stability, which was largely phantasmatic since it was attributed to the traditional orders and hierarchical values that supported them, but also and more especially in relation to the new project of stabilising reality, which was being established with the formation of the nation-states. This social mobility was seen as particularly scandalous when the measures put in place were justified on the grounds of meritocratic values, as was the case in democracies. The state was powerless when it came to controlling the erratic changes generated by the vagaries of finance and, as such, was unable to see through the project that had justified its existence and raised the hopes of so many people, particularly those in the rising middle classes. Not only did it come up against the treacherous machinations of competing countries and the subversive efforts of anarchist and socialist revolutionaries but it was also constantly hampered by the no less revolutionary nature of capitalism, which it nevertheless sought to make use of to increase its power.

The relationship between the state, the nation and capitalism was particularly problematic in countries whose political system exploited democracy and which (to varying degrees) valued the principles of equality and freedom. Although the original crime and spy novels often had a clearly anti-democratic orientation, it can be assumed that the political context put in place by the democratic nation-state played an important role in their emergence. In order to succeed, these genres had to address readers whose critical capacities were such that they had freedom (even if purely internal) to be able to enjoy these thought experiments that consisted in testing the fragility of reality, which was a way of questioning its absolute character. In the European democracies of the late 19th century, the unification of reality as well as the critical capacities to change its contours—at least

imaginarily—were stimulated not only by an extension of education at national level but also and perhaps predominantly by the development of the press, whose role in the formation of a ‘national consciousness’ has been demonstrated by Anderson.¹² The press, which is where the first crime stories appeared, therefore provided a growing audience with diverse points of view as well as the results of a plurality of inquiries or, more generally, the results of a picture of reality. Many of these results were presented in literary form. We can see this, for example, in the role played by the social novel in France—particularly Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*—in shaping the mentalities that manifested during the Revolutions of 1848.¹³ The social novel genre was heavily censored by Napoleon III as a result.

It is therefore not surprising that first crime and then spy fiction emerged as specific genres in two countries that played a leading role in the formation of the modern state and the establishment of political regimes based on parliamentary democracy, namely France and Great Britain. The authoritarian state was not very conducive to the development of crime fiction. Its desire to shape reality and above all to closely control its representation can become so extreme that it becomes impossible to engage in subtle literary games that consist in presenting reality in a state of crisis. More importantly, it can simply be forbidden, under pain of imprisonment or death, to disseminate this public use of the powers of the imagination to a wide audience. Crime and spy novels lose all their impact in an authoritarian context. The reader knows where the inquiry will take them because the characters are automatically distributed according to categories and typologies that make the good and the bad, the friends and enemies of the regime in question, immediately identifiable. The demands of propaganda are incompatible with uncertainty, which is the foundation for producing *suspense* effects.

And history copied literature

To close this presentation, I would like to refer to a work by Franz Kafka called *The Trial*. Many commentators have lauded Kafka’s genius in the way in which he so closely interconnected all the different threads in the work. I have sought here to disentangle ever so slightly the main threads that make up the labyrinth he created. The undeniable formal similarities

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 2006.

¹³ See Michèle Riot-Sarcey, Maurizio Gribaudi, 1848, *la révolution oubliée*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009.

linking the situations presented in *The Trial* with the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry seem to reveal both the objective intentions and what we might call the historial meaning of the two literary genres that have guided this study. By inverting and subverting the devices that underpinned the crime and spy novels, which had been so successful at the beginning of the 20th century, *The Trial* threw a lugubrious light not only on these narratives, which were in principle intended only to entertain, but also on the conjunctures they referenced in reality and which prefigured the subsequent tragic twist in Europe's history.

I will summarise the argument as follows. *The Trial* was constructed very precisely in the same way that a crime novel was, but it represented its symmetrical and reversed mirror image.¹⁴ Let us consider the question of *mystery* first. In the case of the crime novel, the story begins with a mysterious event. This event does have meaning (most often that someone has been murdered), but *to be meaningful*, it has to be *attributed* to an entity, usually one person or a group of people. The main driving force of the narrative revolves around the search for this entity and the task of attributing the event to it. In *The Trial*, this narrative situation is reversed since the culprit is determined from the outset and a crime is immediately attributed to him. However, the event that is meant to be at the root of the inquiry remains a mystery. We do not find out, indeed we will never find out, what it was.

Let us now consider the state's relationship with this agent, whom we will call the *opponent*, to borrow Greimas's term.¹⁵ While the state was a transparent organisation in the original spy novels, the adversary was often a hidden organisation with vague contours. In *The Trial*, this situation is reversed, with the state organisation being presented as hidden and vague. The reader never knows for sure whether a particular character is acting independently of the state organisation or whether they are playing a secret role in its workings, for example, by acting as an informant or spy. I should add finally that *The Trial* can be read as a kind of quasi-clinical description of a case of paranoid delusion. This interpretation is suggested by a whole set of indicators, including in particular the way in which K notes elements in the situations he is forced into that seem abnormal to him and which he interprets as 'signs' that require interpretation on his part.

Hence, by offering a reflection of paranoia and an inverted reflection of the crime and/or spy novel, *The Trial* served to *unveil* the implicit assumptions contained, on the one hand, in a literary genre that was relatively new (but had a very promising future) at the time of writing and, on the other, in the identification of a mental illness that had made a dramatic appearance in the field of psychiatry some fifteen years earlier. On a strictly *formal* level, this unveiling operation can be loosely compared to the way in which, according to Girard, Christianity operates in relation to the religious form. Girard thus interpreted the evangelical message as the announcement of the end of the religious. In the case of *The Trial*, however, it is obviously another religion that is being unveiled, that of the nation-state, the supposed 'constitutional state' that was based on respect for the law and which was meant to guarantee 'peace', its citizens' identity (K keeps up a constant feverish search for his identity papers, which are, in his eyes, a kind of justification) and, more generally, support for a regular, predictable but also merciless reality. In other words, as many exegeses have attempted to show, *The Trial* unveiled and announced the dangers inherent in the nation-state, this new avatar of the state form that was unfolding in nineteenth-century Europe and which, at the time when the novel was written (namely the beginning of the First World War), was already replete with the monstrosities that were to come. What was foreseen in *The Trial* actually had to happen *in reality* for this work to become the symbol of a radical change in what might be called *the representation of reality in Western literature*, to customise the subtitle of Auerbach's great work (which he wrote between 1942 and 1945 while in exile in Istanbul, where he found refuge after fleeing the Nazi dictatorship).¹⁶ Our reality, which is woven together with crimes, mysteries and conspiracies, is always threatened by its twin. Reading crime and spy novels, which has acted as a substitute for if not 'morning prayer' then at least 'evening prayer', to paraphrase Hegel, has accustomed us to looking at this twin reality as both abnormal and mundane, dreary but exciting. Reality itself.

¹⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1994 (Translated from German by Idris Parry).

¹⁵ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1983 (Translated from French by Ronald Schliefer, D. McDowell and Alan Velie. Introduction by Ronald Schliefer).

¹⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003 (Translated from German by Willard R. Trask. Introduction by Edward W. Said).