

## **Anchoring and objectifying ‘neocortical warfare’: re-presentation of a biological metaphor in Serbian conspiracy literature<sup>1</sup>**

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The paper examines an aspect of the rhetoric of conspiracy theory in the light of the social representations approach. It proposes that the theory of social representations can complement discourse-oriented methods in the exploration of rhetorical aspects of conspiracism. A specific example from contemporary Serbian conspiracy culture is examined in order to suggest that the processes of *re-presentation*, and more specifically *anchoring* and *objectification* (Moscovici, 1976, 1984b) play an important role in the continuous transformation of conspiracist ideology. The function of representation in conspiratorial rhetoric is explored on the way in which the metaphorical reference to ‘neocortical war’ in US military literature on information warfare was anchored into Serbian conspiratorial discourse, and eventually objectified, by being transformed into a literal allusion to brain manipulation. It is suggested that, as well as altering the meaning of the phrase ‘neocortical war’, the process of representation also created a more convincing and plausible way of formulating the idea of conspiratorial mass manipulation. The representation of ‘neocortical war’ is offered as an example of a more general discursive dynamic, which contributed to the proliferation of conspiratorial explanations in Serbia in the late 1990s. The proposed rhetorical aspect of representation is also used to recommend, in line with the arguments set out by Billig (1993; 1988a), that rather than being reducible to individual cognitive

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functioning as some social representations research suggests, *anchoring* and *objectification* are products of discursive interaction and communication, reflecting the broader ideological and social functions of representation.

## Introduction

Moscovici’s theory of social representations has for many years been at the forefront of the battle to rescue social psychology from the constraints of reductionism inherent in traditional psychological approaches. In *La Psychoanalyse, son image et son public* (1976), Moscovici suggested that traditional social psychology had become detached from the concern with the interdependence between individual psychology and society (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). The aim of the social representations theory was to draw the discipline away from the sterile environment of the laboratory, and turn it into ‘an anthropological and historical science’ (Moscovici, 1984a, p.948), which examines socially shared beliefs in their natural environment. In contrast to traditional psychological concepts such as attitudes or cognitive schemata, social representations were conceived as ‘systems of values, ideas and practices’ (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii) which have a supra-individual quality, irreducible to personal psychology. Research interests turned to the analysis, on a more cultural and societal level, of the content, structure and evolution of specific representations. This shift towards the supra-individual level of analysis is manifested in the fact that social representations are today frequently sought, dissected and investigated at the level of mass media and communication (Farr, 1998).

The theory of social representations is often portrayed as being in controversy with approaches based on the study of discourse and rhetoric (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards, 1997). Some discourse analysts have argued that Moscovici’s theory contains traces of cognitivism rendering it incompatible with discursive psychology and other social constructionist approaches (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter & Litton, 1985; Potter & Edwards, 1999). Particularly problematic, from the discourse analytic point of view, has been the tendency in social representations research to treat the processes of *anchoring* and *objectification* as taking place at the level of individual cognition, rather than as aspects of communication, which occur in the context of everyday talk and interaction (van Dijk, 1991; Potter & Billig, 1992). In spite of these disagreements, some attempts have been made to reconcile social representations and the study of discourse (Billig, 1988a; Harré, 1984, 1998). Billig, (1988a, 1993) for example, drew attention to the argumentative and rhetorical aspects of *anchoring* and *objectification*, thus bringing together the theory of social representations and rhetorical psychology. Similarly, Moscovici (1998) recently reiterated the importance of language in the process of representation, and suggested that the analysis of discourse can complement his theory by exploring in greater detail its linguistic and discursive aspects.

The present article will attempt to pursue the reconciliatory argument further by illustrating, using the example of contemporary Serbian conspiracy culture, the way in which the social representations approach and the analysis of rhetoric can be jointly used to help explain periodical outbreaks and the proliferation of collective beliefs. In his research on conspiracy theories, Billig (1978, 1987a, 1988b, 1989) demonstrated the advantages of discourse-based methodologies and rhetorical analysis in exploring the cultural and ideological aspects of conspiracism. A similar approach has been used recently to examine the rise in popularity of conspiracy theories in the Serbian media and public discourse with the advent of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in the Spring of 1999 (Byford & Billig, 2001). In the discussion that follows, it will be suggested that the theory of social representations can make a valuable

contribution to the understanding of the rhetorical aspects of conspiracist ideology. A specific example from contemporary Serbian conspiracy culture will be examined in order to suggest that the processes of *representation*, and more specifically *anchoring* and *objectification* (Moscovici, 1976, 1984b), played a significant role in the diffusion and proliferation of conspiratorial explanations in Serbia during the war with NATO. The proposed rhetorical aspect of representation will then be used to recommend, in line with the arguments set out by Billig (1993; 1988a), that rather than being reducible to individual cognitive functioning as some social representations research suggests, *anchoring* and *objectification* are products of discursive interaction and communication, reflecting the broader ideological and social functions of representation.

### **Conspiracy theory: cognitive bias or a cultural tradition**

The term ‘conspiracy theory’ refers to the idea that social and historical events occur as a consequence of a carefully worked out plan, plotted in secret by a small group of powerful individuals who aim for world domination. Also, implicit in the conspiracy notion is the belief that the observable reality is not what it seems, but is an illusion, a smokescreen which hides the real motives of evil conspirators (Groh, 1987). Conspiracy theories tend to crop up at specific times in history, usually in response to some unforeseen historical or political event (Lipset and Raab 1978; Billig, 1978; 1987a). In the face of dramatic social developments, old explanations break down, making people more susceptible to causal explanations based on the notion of a menacing plot (Groh, 1987).

Periodical outbreaks of conspiracism that engulf whole societies (e.g. Germany in the 1930s; Cohn, 1957) or cultures (contemporary Arab world; Pipes, 1996) have proved to be problematic for traditional psychological accounts of conspiratorial beliefs. Psychological explanations, most of which focus on conspiracy theory as an attributional bias (e.g. Hewstone, 1989; Kruglanski, 1987) have so far failed to explain the dynamic which causes whole communities to change their attributional style in the face of some social trauma (Billig, 1978). Similarly, research on causal attributions has been unable to explain why conspiracy theorists consistently ascribe causes of social events to the *same* organisations or ethnic groups (the Illuminati, Jews, or the Bilderbergers), which are persistently identified as being behind the sinister plot aimed at world domination (Billig, 1978, 1987a).

In recognition of the problems of the periodical recurrence and persistence of conspiracy theories, most contemporary social psychologists acknowledge the significant social and cultural dimension of conspiratorial beliefs (Hewstone, 1989; Hogg & Vaughan, 1995). In recent years, the study of conspiracism has been mainly confined to disciplines such as sociology, history or the study of discourse (Billig, 1978, 1987a, 1989), all of which appear to be more suitable for exploring the broader ideological aspects of the phenomenon. Contemporary studies of conspiracism tend to focus on the examination of the discourse of conspiracy theory in the context of its cultural and ideological heritage (Hofstadter, 1966; Lipset & Raab, 1978; Billig, 1978; Fenster, 1999; Pipes, 1997). In most cases, conspiracy theory is regarded as a historically specific cultural tradition which has been evolving since the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, when the success of the French revolution was blamed on the hidden machinations of the Bavarian Illuminati and the Freemasons (Billig, 1978; Roberts, 1974; Pipes, 1997).

Analyses of the discourse of conspiracy theory have revealed that an important feature of conspiratorial culture, which contributes to its endurance and persistence, is its fluid and dynamic quality (Cohn, 1957; Lipsett & Raab, 1978; Billig, 1978). The 200 yearlong history of modern conspiracism has been marked by continuous evolution and transformation. In many cases, the catalyst for change has been the need to make this type of explanation more plausible, acceptable,

and pertinent in response to changing social circumstances. For example, the conspiracy tradition had for many years been linked with anti-Semitism as conspiracy theorists in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century often identified Jews as secretly plotting world domination (Cohn, 1957). Since the Second World War, this tradition of explanation has been resoundingly discredited in mainstream Western political discourse. Ideologists who continued to promote anti-Semitic prejudice have been confined to the outer reaches of the political spectrum (Billig, 1987a). However, the marginalisation of conspiratorial anti-Semitism did not completely eradicate the conspiracy tradition from public discourse. Many conspiracy theorists abandoned the notion of a Jewish plot in favour of a seemingly more acceptable version of conspiratorial explanation. The focus of attention gradually shifted away from the Jews as conspirators, towards non-ethnic world elite organisations such as the Council on Foreign Relations or the Bilderberg group (Lipsett & Raab, 1978). Many attributes previously associated with Jews or the Illuminati were projected onto the members of modern-day elite organisations. At the same time, the absence of overt anti-Semitic themes allowed conspiracy theorists to continue with the transmission of their ideological tradition in a more plausible and socially acceptable way.

As a result of the continuous transformation of conspiracy theories, contemporary conspiracism is not a monolithic culture. Instead, it consists of numerous variants, ranging from the relatively sophisticated to the absurd. Although a common ideological heritage blurs the boundaries between different conspiratorial explanations, on the basis of the afore mentioned post-war transformation of conspiracist ideology, it may be possible to make at least a theoretical distinction between *classical* and *world elite* conspiracy theories (Byford & Billig, 2001). *Classical* conspiracy theories are a legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century conspiracy tradition, and are concerned with the esoteric working of the Jews or secret societies such as the Illuminati or the Freemasons. This type of conspiratorial discourse is also characterised by strong pseudo-scientific, mystical and esoteric overtones, which are often manifested in the way in which methods of mass manipulation are conceptualised. In contrast, the more recent *world elite* conspiracy theories tend to adopt a literary style that simulates mainstream analyses of international relations. Pseudo-science and mysticism are largely absent from this type of explanation, reflecting its more ‘sensible’ and rational image.

It is important to note that the Bilderberg group, the Trilateral Commission and other organisations, which feature in the more ‘reasonable’ and seemingly innocuous *world elite* versions of conspiracy theory were not invented by the conspiracy theorists themselves. Instead, these real and existing world elite organisations were imported into the conspiracy tradition from other contemporary discourses, such as various explanations of current affairs, international relations, world politics, etc. In other words, instrumental in the transformation of conspiratorial culture after the Second World War was the process of communication and exchange between conspiracy theories and other more socially acceptable and respectable worldviews. Through this kind of interaction, concepts, arguments and ideas originating from reputable, non-conspiratorial discourses were incorporated within the conspiratorial tradition, transforming it in a way that gave the basic thesis of conspiracy a more acceptable and convincing image.

In the present article it will be suggested that this inter-ideological communication and exchange, which underlies the continuous transformation of conspiracy theories, reflects the dynamic of *representation* (Moscovici, 1976, 1984b). In his work on the interpretation of psychoanalysis in the French press in the 1960s, Moscovici examined the way in which concepts belonging to a specific, specialist discourse (i.e. psychoanalysis) were *re-presented* (*anchored, objectified*) in everyday language before becoming part of the commonsense understanding of the world. A similar process can be said to underlie the way in which concepts, images and metaphors from reputable discourses are incorporated and assimilated within conspiracy theory before becoming a regular feature of the conspiratorial explanatory framework.

The role of *representation* in conspiratorial rhetoric will be illustrated by an example from contemporary Serbian conspiracy culture. An enduring theme in conspiratorial accounts of the Western intervention in the Balkans, which flourished in the Serbian media at the time of the NATO bombing, was the notion of mass manipulation through which the alleged conspirators are said to keep the world’s population in the dark about their sinister deeds and motivations. The techniques of manipulation described by various conspiracy theorists ranged from the ‘satanisation’ of Serbs in the Western press, to brainwashing and the implantation of microchips inside people’s skulls. In recent years, the different means of mass manipulation were often described by conspiracy theorists in Serbia as mere strategies within a broader and more threatening ‘*neocortical war*’. However, as will become apparent, the phrase ‘neocortical war’ was not a product of the imagination of Serbian conspiracy theorists. Rather, the term originates from US military literature where it had been used, in the mid 1990s, as a metaphor for the relatively novel concept of ‘information warfare’. The sections that follow will examine the way in which the ‘neocortical’ metaphor was incorporated into Serbian conspiracy theory, and suggest that the process involved reflects the dynamic of re-presentation, anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1976, 1984b).

The representation of ‘neocortical warfare’ in Serbian conspiratorial discourse consisted of two separate stages. In the first phase of representation, the term was anchored within the world elite conspiracy theory. At this stage, the phrase by and large retained its original, metaphorical meaning. Only in the second phase was ‘neocortical war’ anchored into the more extreme, classical conspiratorial discourse. At this point ‘neocortical war’ was *objectified*, and its original metaphorical meaning transformed into a literal reference to attacks on the human brain. Each of the two stages of representation will be examined in turn.

### **Information warfare and the biological metaphor: ‘Neocortical warfare’ in US military literature**

As was already mentioned, the phrase ‘neocortical war’ originates from US literature on information warfare. Since the early 1990s, Western military analysts have become increasingly interested in the idea of information as a weapon. According to Professor George Stein of the US Air Force Air War College, the term ‘information warfare’ refers to a variety of techniques, ranging from the interception of enemy communication to psychological operations, all of which are aimed at achieving military objectives through persuasion, without the use of violent means (Stein, 1995).

The information warfare paradigm is largely based on Toffler’s wave theory of war which assumes that military history, just like history in general, can be divided into three distinct periods, or waves (Toffler, 1980; Toffler & Toffler, 1994). In much of the relevant literature, the recent onset of the so-called ‘information age’ is seen as a radically new development which requires the formulation of innovative ways of looking at military conflict. The novelty of ‘information warfare’ is often emphasised through the construction of new metaphors. As John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, editors of a recent collection of essays on information warfare suggest:

‘Epochal shifts call for new metaphors. Metaphors and analogies help convey new concepts by providing simplified images that encapsulate complex points’ (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1997, p.8)

The use of metaphor to capture the essence of the concept of information war is evident in the article ‘*Neocortical warfare: towards the acme of skill*’ published in the US journal *The Military Review* in November 1994. In the article, Richard Szafranski, a retired US army colonel

and military analyst, used an analogy with human cortical anatomy to illustrate the characteristics of warfare in the information age. In using the analogy of the human body to aid the understanding of an aspect of social life (in this case modern warfare) Szafranski followed a trend that dates back to antiquity. Parallels between body parts and sections of society or the state can be found in the Bible, Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* as well as in many classics of sociology such as Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology* or Durkheim’s writing on ‘collective representations’ (Gergen, 1990). Biological metaphors are also common in everyday talk, when state institutions are referred to as ‘organs’, or when some scandal is said to have struck at the ‘heart’ of government.

To justify the use of a biological analogy, Szafranski cites the work of two historians, Will and Ariel Durant (1968) who are quoted as saying that ‘the laws of biology are fundamental lessons of history’ (Szafranski, 1994/1997, p.396). The metaphor itself is constructed on the basis of a number of neuro-physiological theories, including Ornstein’s and Thompson’s (1984) work on the hemispheric division of the cortex. However, crucial to the labelling of the new form of warfare as ‘neocortical’ is Paul McLean’s idea of the ‘triune brain’, which proposes a threefold differentiation of the human central nervous system, based on different stages of evolutionary development. After outlining the distinction between the reptilian, paleo-mammalian and neo-mammalian/neocortical parts of the brain, Szafranski (1994/1997) notes that ‘the triune brain suggests an analogy’ (p.403). The ‘neo-mammalian brain’ or the ‘necrotic’, which is capable of ‘organisation, integration and the conceptualisation of time and space’ is taken to represent war in the information age. The suggested aim of ‘neocortical warfare’ is ‘influencing, even to the point of regulating the consciousness, perception and will of the adversary’s leadership: the enemy’s neocortical system’ (p.404).

Throughout Szafranski’s article, the term ‘neocortex’ is used primarily as a metaphor referring to the enemy’s (collective) decision-making structures. Consistently with the cerebral analogy, the metaphorical ‘brain’ is portrayed as having its own psychological mechanisms. Szafranski argues that the collective neocortex needs to be presented with ‘perceptions, sensory and cognitive data’ in order to influence its ‘patterns and images’. Also, he advocates the use of ‘tools similar to Bandler’s and Grinder’s neurolinguistic programming to understand how the adversary receives, processes and organises visual and kinaesthetic perceptions.’ (Szafranski, 1994/1997, p.405)

Literature on metaphors, especially those used in psychological writing, suggests that when analogies are employed to facilitate the understanding of a novel idea, there is often a slippage from metaphorical to literal expression (Soyland, 1994). As the analogy becomes more elaborate, concepts originally used for comparison within a figure of speech tend to become treated as if they are the actual objects under discussion. A similar trend is visible in Szafranski’s article. On occasions the word ‘brain’ is used not as a metaphor for enemy leadership, but as a metonymy for individual enemy soldiers. For example, Szafranski describes traditional warfare as consisting of ‘more elaborate means and methods of destroying brains’, as an indirect way of getting at the collective will. The metaphorical status of the ‘neocortex’ is further obscured when Szafranski challenges his own biological analogy by recognising that ‘analogies suggesting that states are like biological organisms are convenient, simplistic and of course flawed’ (p.396). The equivocation regarding the validity of his choice of metaphor leads Szafranski to adopt a reductionist stance which acknowledges that the ‘chain of events that culminates in war’ is attributable to the ‘human factor’ (‘crazy leaders’) rather than to the qualities of some metaphorical organism (‘crazy state’). Reductionism of this kind undermines the metaphorical status of the psychological jargon employed in the rest of the article. Furthermore, if collective ‘psychology’ is portrayed as reducible to individual psychological functioning, then only a short hermeneutic step is needed before the references to ‘sensory and kinaesthetic’ perceptions or

neurolinguistic programming are interpreted as being aimed as actual, individual ‘neocortices’ rather than at their metaphorical, collective equivalent.

As will become apparent later, the literalisation of the metaphor was precisely what happened when the idea of ‘neocortical warfare’ was represented within the wilder reaches of Serbian conspiratorial culture. However, although the ambiguity of the original metaphor may have contributed to the nature of the re-presentation of the concept in Serbian conspiracy literature, it is important to remember that in the original text ‘neocortical warfare’ was explicitly introduced as an ‘analogy’. Also, it was interpreted as such in the US military literature that commented on Szafranski’s article (e.g. Whitehead, 1997; DiNardo & Hughes, 1995). Although the idea of ‘neocortical warfare’ has been heavily criticised by Western military analysts, none of the criticisms imply that Szafranski’s article proposes a revolutionary method aimed at actual brain manipulation. This can be taken as evidence that the interpretation of Szafranski’s ideas in Yugoslav conspiracy literature cannot be attributed solely to the ambiguity of the original metaphor. Instead, as the following sections will demonstrate, instrumental in the literalisation of the ‘neocortical’ metaphor was the process of *re-presentation* and more specifically *anchoring* and *objectification*.

### **First phase of conspiratorial re-presentation: transforming a personal view into a ‘doctrinal rule’**

In 1995, Yugoslavia’s principal military journal *Vojno Delo* published a text entitled ‘*Information operations – a further examination of US military doctrine*’. As the author – retired navy captain Ivko Lukic – explained in a footnote, the aim of the article was to ‘provide an outline of a series of texts’ published in *The Military Review* in November 1994, and shed some light on the conceptualisation of information warfare in the *Doctrine FM 100-5*, which had been adopted by the US military, in 1993 (Lukic, 1995, p.210). Because Lukic’s article was intended as an appraisal of the whole issue of *The Military Review*, specific contributors were not individually identified. Instead, authors were referred to collectively, again in a footnote, as ‘a group of eminent authors from the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy’. Consequently, although Lukic’s article devoted four pages (out of the 20-page text) to Szafranski’s formulation of ‘neocortical warfare’, the latter’s authorship was never acknowledged. Even though the omission can be dismissed as poor scholarship on Lukic’s part, the misattribution of authorship has had important rhetorical implications. By associating Szafranski’s ideas with ‘eminent authors from the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy’, the notion of ‘neocortical warfare’ was given institutional legitimacy, which it would not have had if it had been accurately presented as a widely criticised personal view of a retired army colonel. Moreover, Lukic not only presented ‘neocortical war’ as an idea promoted by prominent policy makers within the US military establishment, but also treated it as an established ‘doctrinal rule’ that had already been implemented in the Balkans, to the detriment of the Serbian people. Lukic commented that ‘Americans have never publicised a doctrinal rule without trying out most of its postulates – whether on polygons or in practice – on one of the victims of their foreign policy’ (Lukic, 1995; p.226). He went on to attribute the widespread anti-Serbian bias in Western media to the successful application of the ‘doctrine of neocortical warfare’ (p.226).

The transformation of ‘neocortical warfare’ from the vision of an individual analyst to an important aspect of US military doctrine can be seen as the first step in the re-presentation of ‘neocortical warfare’ in Yugoslav conspiracy literature. According to Moscovici, the process of representation is a manifestation of the universal need to make the unfamiliar familiar. Novel concepts and ideas become part of common sense by being assimilated within an existing worldview. In other words:

‘The images, ideas and language shared by a given group always seem to dictate the initial direction and expedient by which the group comes to term with the unfamiliar’ (Moscovici, 1984b, p.26)

Instrumental in the process of re-presentation is *anchoring*, which aims to ‘reduce strange ideas to ordinary categories and images, to set them in a familiar context’ (Moscovici, 1984b, p.29) and ‘[integrate] new information within a system of familiar categories’ (Abric, 1996, p.72). The same dynamic can be said to underlie Lukic’s reading of Szafranski’s formulation of ‘neocortical warfare’. The worldview, which dictated the direction of Lukic’s interpretation, was the conspiratorial cultural tradition.

From the early 1990s, the journal *Vojno Delo* played an important part in the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Over the years, the journal published articles written by some of Serbia’s best known conspiracy theorists, including Drago Kalajic, Milan Milosevic, Smilja Avramov, Mihajlo Markovic and others (Byford & Billig, 2001). Most of these articles focused on the world elite conspiracy aimed at the creation of a ‘New World Order’. It is within this tradition of explanation that Lukic’s article can be located.

As was noted earlier, one of the basic premises of conspiratorial culture is the idea of mass manipulation (Hofstadter, 1966; Billig, 1978). Conspiracy theorists believe that visible reality is just a façade that hides the intentions of evil organisations, which are plotting world domination. Within the conspiracist culture, the idea that it may be possible to affect perceptions and thinking patterns is not treated as, at best, a vision of warfare in the future, but is accepted as a crucial feature of contemporary reality. Consequently, as the idea of ‘neocortical warfare’ was *anchored* into a conceptual framework which takes the reality of the New World Order conspiracy for granted, (Szafranski’s) personal vision was re-presented as describing existing and effective methods of manipulation.

Significantly however, Lukic’s article, as the first stage of re-presentation of ‘neocortical warfare’ in Serbian conspiracy literature, did not question the metaphorical dimension of Szafranski’s argument. Although Lukic did not reflect on Szafranski’s elaborate discussion of the cortical anatomy, he nonetheless interpreted and described ‘neocortical warfare’ within the confines of the biological analogy. For example, the original formulation of the ‘enemy’s neocortical system’ as referring to ‘its leadership’ was faithfully reported, thus preserving the metaphorical connotations of the ‘neocortex’. At the same time, some of the original ambiguity of the metaphor was further accentuated when Lukic noted that

‘Authors then direct their attention to the characteristics of the human brain, consulting various experts in the sphere of psychology, the human mind and will, and conclude that “war is the only thing that simultaneously allows and demands the employment of all human capacities, the highest as well as the lowest”. This means that the human brain is capable of organising the strength and the means for killing and destruction, but at the same time it allows the limitation of the application of brute force’ (Lukic, 1995; p.224)

‘Various experts’ (presumably Ornstein, Thompson and McLean) whose work was originally cited in order to justify the cortical analogy were on this occasion re-presented as being actually ‘consulted’ by US policy makers. This, and the fact that ‘the brain’ is presented as the subject of the authors’ attention, constitutes a significant departure from the otherwise mainly metaphorical allusion to the cortex. Importantly, although the ambiguity obscures the metaphor, Lukic at no point suggests that ‘neocortical warfare’ directly aims at the brains of individuals.

A possible explanation for Lukic’s relatively ‘moderate’ interpretation of neocortical warfare, in spite of the ambiguous nature of the metaphor, is that Lukic’s work belongs to the more

‘reasonable’, world elite conspiracy theory. As was noted earlier, world elite conspiracy theorists have by and large abandoned the more controversial mystical and pseudo-scientific themes characteristic of classical conspiracy literature. In world elite conspiracy theories, allegations concerning the implantation of microchips in people’s brains, interference with neural functions, etc. are largely absent. Therefore, the retention of the metaphorical meaning of ‘neocortical war’ in Lukic’s writing can be attributed to the fact that this was a meaningful, and rhetorically advantageous way of anchoring Szafranski’s ideas within the tradition of explanation to which Lukic appears to subscribe.

### **Second phase of re-presentation: objectification of the ‘neocortex’ in the writing of Svetozar Radisic**

Shortly after ‘neocortical warfare’ had been introduced into Serbian conspiratorial discourse, the term was also incorporated into the wilder reaches of the Serbian conspiracy culture. In the present section, the re-presentation of neocortical warfare within the classical conspiracy tradition will be examined, using the example of the book *Neocortical war*, written in 1999 by Colonel Svetozar Radisic, an officer in the Yugoslav Army and for many years the editor-in-chief of *Vojno Delo*. The anchoring of ‘neocortical warfare’ into the more extreme versions of the classical conspiracy tradition will be shown to have been accompanied by the process of objectification through which Szafranski’s biological metaphor was transformed into a literal reference to brain manipulation.

The book *Neocortical War* was published in 1999 by the Military Publishing Institute, the official publishing house of the Yugoslav Army. As well as being the editor of *Vojno Delo*, the author of the book, Colonel Svetozar Radisic, was also a regular contributor to *Revija 92*, a popular magazine which specialises in military affairs and whose editorial policy is thought to be particularly favourable towards the Yugoslav military establishment. Most of the content of the book *Neocortical war* appeared previously in the columns of *Revija 92* as well as in a little known pamphlet on ‘full-dimensional warfare’ (Radisic, 1997), which was circulated internally among Yugoslav army officers.

Although the title of Radisic’s book suggests that Szafranski’s concept of ‘neocortical warfare’ captured his imagination, a closer examination of the book’s content offers no indication that the author actually read any of Szafranski’s work. Instead, descriptions of ‘neocortical warfare’ found in the book consist entirely of paraphrases of Lukic’s re-presentation of the concept. For example, Radisic notes that :

‘in articles which have been published in the journal “Military Review”, in November, 1994, a group of eminent authors from the Fort Leavenworth military academy confirmed, in their analysis of US military power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that the Pentagon examined various aspects of the operationalisation of “neocortical warfare”. It only confirmed that the (un)popular methods of mind control found their way into military doctrines’ (Radisic, 1999; p. 15-16).

The misattribution of authorship and the interpretation of Szafranski’s article as describing actuality rather than a vision of the future match, practically word for word, Lukic’s representation of ‘neocortical warfare’. However, although Lukic’s article seems to have been Radisic’s only source of information on the subject of ‘neocortical war’, the latter treats the phrase as signifying much more than a metaphorical reference to methods used to influence the decision-making processes of the enemy leadership. As the above paragraph suggests, the concept is taken to signify the ‘(un)popular method of mind control’. Crucially, the ‘mind’ does

not refer to the collective will of the metaphorical enemy as in Szafranski’s or Lukic’s texts, but to the actual mind of individuals. This is evident when Radisic suggests that:

‘the working definition of this, increasingly more popular term could be stated as: neocortical war is a conflict between one side which uses the totality of methods aimed at the cortex, so that by deforming specific areas and by interfering with their functions, a person’s relationship with his innate ‘voice of conscience’ would be disrupted, thus creating conditions for manipulating individuals, groups and peoples, in a way that would lead them to incorporate particular ideas, most frequently those which are inconsistent with their real interests’ (p.12)

Radisic proposes that this new method of war ‘includes the so called inactivation or blocking of neural functions which can cause death, because we are talking about the pinnacle of total war and its crucial characteristic’ (Radisic, 1999; p.11). These allusions to the attacks on the neocortex and the interference with neural functions are not in any way metaphorical, but refer literally, to techniques aimed at the organic brain. This becomes clear later in the book when Radisic examines the techniques of neocortical war in more detail, invoking many themes associated with the pseudoscientific and mystical strands of classical conspiracy theory, such as the implantation of microchips, brainwashing, the use of subliminal messages, Satanic ritual abuse, etc.

The literalization of Szafranski’s biological metaphor apparent in Radisic’s interpretation of ‘neocortical war’ can be seen as an instance of *objectification*, a process that, according to Moscovici, often accompanies *anchoring* in the creation and maintenance of social representations. Objectification refers to the process that turns the ‘invisible’ and abstract concepts into something ‘perceptible’ and concrete (Farr, 1984), leading to a state of affairs where

‘distinction between image and reality is obliterated. The image of the concept ceases to be a sign and becomes a replica of reality, a simulacrum in the true sense of the word. Then the notion or entity from which it had proceeded loses its abstract, arbitrary character and acquires an almost physical, independent existence. It has the authority of a natural phenomenon for those who use it.’ (Moscovici, 1984b, p.40)

Like much of social representations terminology, the idea of objectification lacks a precise definition. Arguably, objectification involves the use of metaphor *per se*. Moscovici, (1984b) suggested, for example, that the analogy with the ‘father’ *objectifies* the idea of a transcendental God by providing a *figurative nucleus* through which ‘God’, as an abstraction, is suffused with concrete meaning, and thus given a more real and tangible existence. However, the process of objectification seems to involve more than just metaphoric representation. It also assumes that ‘the figurative paradigm [is] detached from its original milieu’ and an abstract idea is ‘let loose in a society [where] it is accepted as a reality, a conventional one but nonetheless a reality’ (Moscovici, 1984b, p.39). In that sense objectification entails the *literalization* of a metaphorical expression. Literalisation of a metaphor objectifies because it ‘de-contextualises’ a concept by removing it from the initial theoretical discourse and organising it in a different and original way (Abric, 1996). In Radisic’s book, the reference to the ‘neocortex’ was dissociated from the discourse of information warfare where it had a metaphorical meaning, and was re-organised or re-presented in a way that transformed the metaphor into a literal allusion to the organic brain targeted by the malicious cabal behind the evil conspiracy.

Importantly, objectification, which can be said to underlie Radisic’s use of the phrase ‘neocortical war’, was accompanied, and in some sense instigated by the process of anchoring. The literalisation of the original metaphor was steered by the ‘images, ideas and culture’ inherent

in the more extreme pseudoscientific versions of conspiracy theory within which the concept was being imported. A common feature of classical conspiracy theories is a profound interest in the way in which conspirators use scientific achievements, real or imagined, to advance their evil causes. Conspiracy theorists who subscribe to this view place particular emphasis on the progress in the field of neuro-physiology or brain wave research (Miller, 1995; Constantine, 1997; Keith, 1999, Vlajic, 1998, 2000), reflecting the conspiracy theorist’s preoccupation with the notion of mass manipulation on which the alleged plot depends. Within these more outrageous strands of conspiratorial cultural tradition, the possibility and actuality of brain manipulation is not only acknowledged, but also treated as crucial to the process of deceiving the masses. Therefore, the anchoring of ‘neocortical’ warfare within the pseudo-scientific conspiratorial system of thought, prepared the ground for the process of objectification and the resulting literalisation of Szafranski’s biological metaphor.

### **Rhetorical implications of re-presentation: social representations and the propagation of a cultural tradition**

Earlier in the article, it was suggested that one of the features of conspiratorial rhetoric is the tendency to incorporate, within the conspiratorial narrative, arguments and concepts, which originate from relatively uncontroversial and common sense discourses. This process can be said to lie beneath what Hofstadter called the ‘leap of the imagination’ frequently found in conspiratorial discourse. In his classic analysis of the ‘paranoid’ style in politics, Hofstadter (1966) suggested that conspiracy theory is characterised by ‘the most careful, conscientious, and seemingly coherent application to detail, the laborious accumulation of what can be taken as convincing evidence’, which precedes a ‘curious leap of the imagination’ from the ‘undeniable to the unbelievable’ (p.37-38). In many ways, the accumulation of ‘convincing evidence’ can be said to involve the process of representation, through which concepts and arguments from less contentious perspectives and discourses are *anchored* within the conspiratorial interpretative framework, and re-presented in a way which is compatible with the conspiratorial tradition. When extraordinary conspiratorial claims seem rational and convincing, as Hofstadter suggests they often do, this is frequently because they are coated in a set of otherwise perfectly sensible and reasonable representations.

The same rhetorical dynamic is evident in the representation of ‘neocortical warfare’ in Serbian conspiracy culture. Since the publication of Lukic’s and Radisic’s work on the subject, the phrase ‘neocortical war’ has become a regular feature in Serbian conspiracy literature. The term is now used to refer to practically any aspect of conspiratorial mass manipulation. More importantly, Radisic’s and Lukic’s writing provided those who promote the idea of mass manipulation with a credible and respectable authority to support their claims. Writers who use the concept of ‘neocortical warfare’ rarely fail to acknowledge that the revelation concerning the reality of neocortical war originates from ‘a group of eminent authors from the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy’, and therefore from a legitimate and trustworthy source which lies at the heart of the alleged conspiracy.

The rhetorical aspect of representation can also be taken as evidence that *anchoring* and *objectification* are more than just automatic processes, which reflect the tendency for the world to be interpreted in terms of available expectations, schemata or ideology. Instead, representation seems also to be implicated in the continuous creation of more convincing ways of stating particular claims, and justifying a stance in a matter of controversy. In the case of conspiracism, representation plays an essential part in the permanent battle against the widespread ‘intellectual presumption against conspiracy theory’ (Pidgen, 1995) and popular scepticism towards conspiratorial claims. Consequently, rather than being a mechanical process, akin to traditional

socio-psychological notions of categorisation or assimilation, representation appears to involve a dynamic and functional practice which reflects the epistemological orientation of language and the rhetorical nature of communication (Billig, 1987, 1991). Moreover, although the dynamic of re-presentation was illustrated using examples from the writing of specific individuals, the examination of the way in which ‘neocortical war’ was incorporated into Serbian conspiracist literature did not succumb to the temptation of treating anchoring and objectification as cognitive processes taking place in the minds of Radisic or Lukic. Instead, an emphasis was placed on the social functioning of representation and its role in the perpetuation and development of a cultural tradition (Billig, 1988). The two individuals and their work are simply instances or expressions of a broader social and ideological dynamic which takes place at the level of discourse and communication, in the context of the ‘unceasing babble’ (Moscovici, 1984, p.950) of everyday interaction.

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