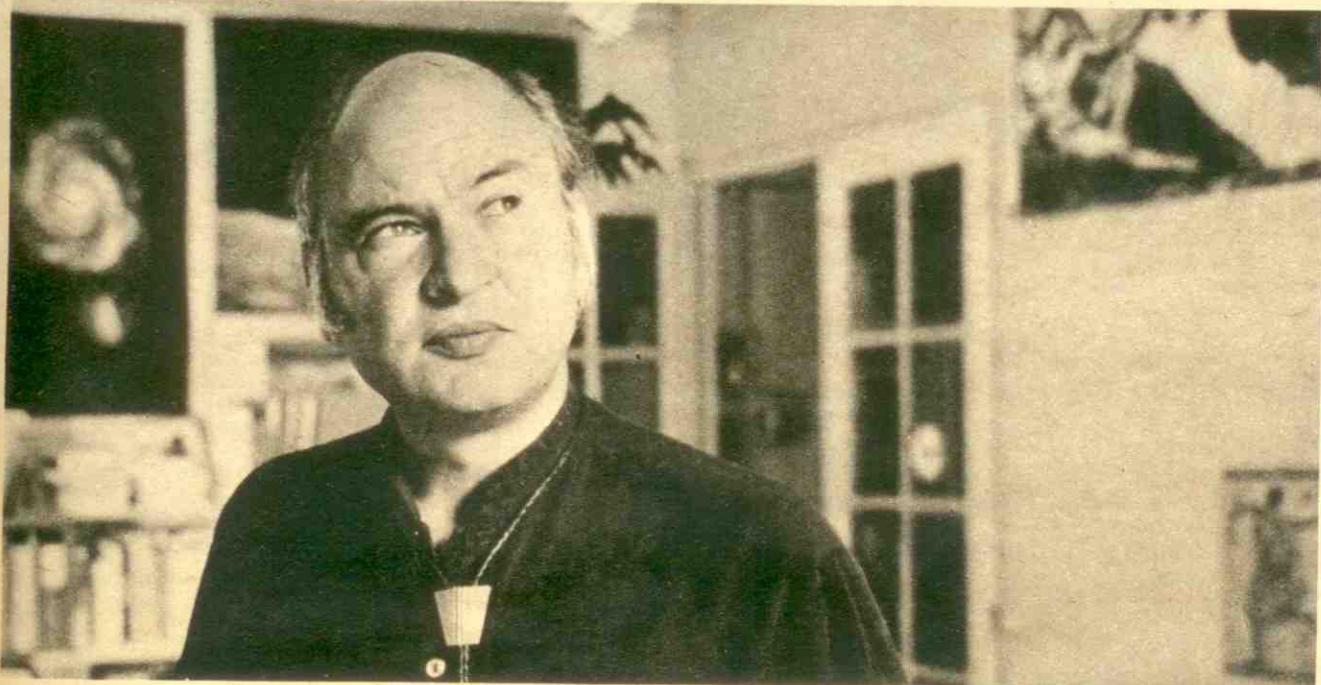


# Rumour in Orléans

By Edgar Morin.  
Translated by Peter Green.  
276 pp. New York:  
Pantheon Books. \$6.95.



Edgar Morin.

Photograph by Jerry Bauer.

By RICHARD ELMAN

Many works of contemporary sociology can be defined as the substitution of self-important words like "methodology" where mere methods might do. It's as if every effort to look hard at some event had to be an "examination," and every explanation was an act of "synthesis." Imprisoned in his Latinate technical jargon of compounds and vulgarisms, the social scientist sometimes seems to be like a character in a play of Samuel Beckett: His language permits him no feelings, and his feelings lack a language. The result in a sort of inadvertent textual comedy of the absurd, declamatory, self-indulgent, obscure: "This dialectic—the source of all modifications, whether evolutive or involutive (the latter, in their own way, evolutive too)—is effectively shaped by events which present themselves to us . . . as significant revelations."

This tendency to hide dim 50-watt filaments inside light bulbs the size of gold-fish tanks has always been distressing in America, where the amphitheatres of human social wisdom have barely been illuminated by our social-scientific professionals. But in Europe, at least until recently, sociologists were merely the philosopher-journalist-witnesses to the societies they inhabited, and they tended to write tersely and reason-

Richard Elman is the author of "An Education in Blood."

ably. To report on the growth of an anti-Semitic calumny in a small French city with more than a fair share of journalistic insights, as Edgar Morin does here in "Rumour in Orléans," for example, might have once seemed like a fairly lightweight stunt. It's doubtful, however, that it would then have been dressed up with words like "occuriential" and "clinical" or concepts like "*sociologie du present*" to bedeck what is, after all, a feather weighted with the grime of specious academic wisdom. But Edgar Morin, a former Marxist, is teaching now in the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, at something called the Center for the Study of Mass Communications; and it just may be, as such labels would imply, that his otherwise clear-minded prose has been contaminated by a desire to get with the obscurantism of his American colleagues.

Morin, after all, had a story to tell. He and five of his colleagues were at Orléans less than a month after the rumor and the panic began spreading; the effects were still evident. For sociology this was probably a radical departure. When he descended on Orléans with that battery of tape recorders that he never used, under the sponsorship of a leading French Jewish organization, it was to discover through interviews with individuals and groups "what this archaic rumour can reveal about the modern world which gave birth to it, and, at a deeper level, to clarify the perennial and crucial problem of belief."

What Morin found was that very

many citizens of Orléans did believe that certain Jewish shopkeepers engage in a white-slavery racket—using trap doors in their dressing rooms down which victims were dropped into cellars to be drugged. The belief persisted even though not a single young girl in Orléans was reported missing. He also discovered that this myth, though instigated initially by members of the Orléans teen-age set (in part as female degradation fantasy, and in part as a response to a story in a scandal magazine, *Black and White*, about a similar incident in Grenoble), was subscribed to by certain staunch members of the community even as they sought to deny it. In fact, the terms of denial were very often acknowledgments of the possibility that such a calumny could have some basis in the Jewish character, and in Jewish behavior.

The journals of Morin and his five colleagues reveal that the Jewish shopkeepers who were libeled in Orléans were the subject of an almost universal envy; they catered to the mod interest of the youth trade, and they were making it. Morin and his colleagues show how in response to the rumor certain other ancient bits of nonsense surfaced from the communal unconsciousness (for example, the supposed existence of a network of cellars connected by tunnels beneath the town of Orléans) and how the city was soon polarized along the traditional lines of French politics. Groups like the Communists issued traditional forties anti-Fascist pieties and diatribes and others,

equally as irrelevant, blamed the rumors on the press, outsiders, or Tixier Vignancourt and the French neo-conservatives.

Morin is particularly interesting about the lingering tradition of anti-Semitism in France, and how it has undergone little transformation since the time of the Dreyfus affair. As he points out, guilt for Europe's martyrdom of the six million temporarily granted Jews pardon and reprieve from the envy and contempt of his European neighbors—it lasted almost until the present day. With new immigrations from North Africa and the emergence of a militant and victorious Israel (with which many French Jews identify) their imaginative position as passive victims has again been altered; anger and envy have again displaced compassion. Frenchmen on the left have turned with their outraged sense of fraternity toward the dark-skinned Third World and then have been mildly irritated to find the Jew occupying a place as one of its chief nemesis; on the right the success of tiny Israel has further fortified and consolidated notions of Jewish craftiness, guile, and élitism.

If the rumor that afflicted Orléans like a plague for more than a fortnight was, as Morin shows, also convenient to the authoritarian French family's efforts to deter its offspring from participating in the free-swinging *ye ye* youth culture, it was also a sort of product of that culture. The phenomenon is similar to the way in which rebellious white youth in this country invented plots in which black revolutionists would pollute reservoirs with LSD, or, even, invented a certain criminal style for themselves, in order to distract criticisms of their naive high-minded reformist tendencies by our culture's established and resigned and to demonstrate the seriousness of their youthful commitment.

Morin says: "The progressive features of change are at the same time regressive." He goes on to explain that both humanist and mass culture fails to understand the modern world, or "to supply norms of life suitable for it"; and that both have become the elements "of a new non-culture." Some of his reflections on sociology and its practice leads me to believe that he does not exempt himself from this vacuum, that, in fact, Morin regards his effort at crisis sociology in Orléans as a sort of failure.

How I wish he had done more as a journalist to depict and dramatize such a startling insight through his "incident" in Orléans, using the words of those who believed and disbelieved in the rumor, and also those who bothered to study it, and that he had not been so intent upon showing us that Frenchmen could write with as much elaborate "methodological" phlegm as their American social-scientific confreres. ■