

(Always) Living in the End Times: The “Rolling Prophecy” of the Conspiracy Milieu

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Introduction

In the near future, Earth is dominated by a powerful world government. Once free nations are slaves to the will of a tiny elite. The dawn of a new dark age is upon mankind. Countries are a thing of the past; every form of independence is under attack, with the family and even the individual itself nearing extinction. Close to 80% of the world’s population has been eliminated. The remnants of a once-free humanity are forced to live within highly controlled, compact, prison-like cities. Travel is highly restricted. Super-highways connect the mega-cities and keep the population from entering into unauthorised zones. No human activity is private. AI super-computers chronicle and categorise every action. A Prison Planet dominated by a ruthless gang of control-freaks, whose power can never be challenged. This is the vision of the global elite, their goal: a program of total dehumanisation, where the science of tyranny is law. A worldwide control grid, designed to ensure the overlords’ monopoly of power for ever. Our species will be condemned to this nightmare future, unless the masses are awakened to the new world order master plan and mobilised to defeat it. (Jones 2007)

In the introduction to his film *Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement*, from which the above is taken, Texas-based broadcaster Alex Jones lays out his vision for the future of the US and the world. Although exact figures are difficult to ascertain, *Endgame* has received millions of online views, despite never receiving a cinematic release. His radio show – broadcast for 3 hours every weekday, and 2 hours on Sundays – is broadcast on 63 FM and AM channels in the Southern US, where talk radio has a broad appeal amongst a largely rural population who are dependant on the automobile (Zaitchik 2011). However, he reaches larger audiences through his websites, principally infowars.com, which consistently ranks as around the 500th most

popular in the US, and 1,700th worldwide, with an audience of primarily middle-aged single males with some college education. Jones is arguably the most popular and influential conspiracist in the world today, although he himself prefers to describe his milieu as the “alternative media”. Such is his popular appeal that many believe that much of the material in Glenn Beck’s hugely popular broadcasts on the mainstream FOX News channel was taken from Alex Jones’ output (Zaitchik 2011). A considerable part of that appeal stems from the perception that Jones is a successful prophet.

Prophecy and millennialism are widespread in conspiracy milieu, although this has received little academic attention. These narratives have typically been predictions of the immanent enslavement of society by one or other hidden, all-powerful group, such as the Illuminati, communists or Zionists. Due to a cross-fertilisation with certain New Age narratives during the 1990s, however, conspiracist prophecy has also increasingly included declarations of an immanent “global awakening”, when the mass of humanity will realise their enslavement and overcome their oppressors.

This chapter attempts to show how millennialist prophecy operates in this diffuse milieu of popular conspiracism, with Jones as a case-study. By examining some of Jones’ allegedly successful prophecies, I demonstrate how they employ what I will call “rolling prophecy”, an on-going process of interpretation. I suggest that rolling prophecy provides a mechanism by which the cognitive dissonance produced by failed date-specific prophecies can be avoided, enabling conspiracist prophecy to function primarily as a form of social critique, reflecting on the present more than predicting the future. As such, it functions as a popular theodicy which attempts to account for the perceived inequalities of contemporary Western society, while offering a Utopian alternative.

Conspiracism

Conspiracy can be defined simply enough: it is “an agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible”. However, a *conspiracy theory* does not mean simply a theory which posits a conspiracy. Both the official and conspiracist explanations of the events of September 11th, 2001, involve conspiracies, yet the Al Qaeda theory, as presented by the 9-11 Commission report, is

never referred to as a conspiracy *theory* (Coady 2007a, 132). A theory which involves a conspiracy, in other words, does not a “conspiracy theory” make.

The implication of this is that the approach taken by most scholars, most influentially in Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in Politics* (1964) - that conspiracy theories should be taken as evidence of mental ill-health, paranoia or irrationality - cannot be correct (Pigden 2007, 222). Such an approach assumes a fundamental difference between unproven *conspiracy theories* (for example, those claiming the moon landings were faked) and proven *conspiracies* (such as US President Nixon’s complicity in covering-up the break-in at the Watergate hotel). In fact, Watergate is only one of many now-accepted historical events which have at one point been regarded as conspiracy theories (Bartlett & Miller 2010, 16). We cannot, therefore, define a conspiracy theory by its contents.

Rather, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has a rhetorical function (Coady 2007b). As employed in political discourses, a conspiracy theory is understood to be “an explanation that conflicts with the account advanced by the relevant epistemic authorities”, and therefore the term’s application is ultimately concerned with power (Levy 181). In short, by labelling an account a conspiracy theory, epistemic authorities including governments and scientific institutions seek to marginalise that account by portraying it as inherently irrational.

To avoid epistemic judgements, I have therefore adopted Barkun’s term *conspiracy belief*, denoting a discreet unit of belief that “an organisation made up of individuals or groups has or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end” (2003, 3). These malevolent ends, of course, are culturally determined and therefore open to interpretation; the promotion of policies concerning centralised world government or gun control may be viewed as benevolent by left-leaning groups, at the same time as forming the malevolent agenda of the conspirators in right-wing groups.

Knight places the beginning of today’s popular conspiracist culture with the establishment of the CIA and the commencement of the Cold War in the late 1940s (2000, 28-31). During the Cold War, conspiracy beliefs were largely restricted to the cultural margins, but during the 1990s, these narratives began to enter the mainstream, with publications such as *The New World Order* (1991) by Pat Robertson, an influential

televangelist, becoming best-sellers. Events such as the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian compound by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms at Waco, Texas, and the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City were broadcast in real-time on the new 24-hour TV News channels. Conspiracist explanations of the events were adopted by the US Militia movement and disseminated enthusiastically on the Internet, and on independent and public access radio stations (Goodrick-Clarke 2003, 281). The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, brought conspiracist narratives to an even broader public already primed with an atmosphere of fear; whereas for those already in the conspiracist milieu, it provided only confirmation of the existence of the conspiracy (*Ibid.*, 168-9). It is worth mentioning at this point that the conspiracist milieu is not typically made up of tight-knit groups with social interactions which reify their belief systems (e.g. see Dein in the present volume), but rather with a diffuse milieu, disseminated through books, the Internet and local radio stations, in which particular writers and broadcasters act as focal points rather than de facto leaders. One of those who became a conspiracist focal point in the post 9-11 period was Alex Jones.

Prophecy and Millennialism in the Conspiracist Milieu

Conspiracism tends to be eschatological, i.e. concerned with the end of time (*eschaton*). Conspiracists, in uncovering a “hidden history”, are led necessarily to extrapolate where the conspirators' plan is heading. Broadly speaking, eschatological narratives take two forms: the *apocalyptic* and the *millennial*. By apocalyptic, I refer to eschatological systems in which the outcome of the end time is total and destructive, for example, the righteous being taken up to heaven and the remaining world consumed by flames. In millennial eschatologies, however, the world is not destroyed but rather transformed, and a better world instigated, as in the Christian belief of the return and thousand-year reign of Christ as recounted in Revelation.

Conspiracist eschatological narratives have typically been of the apocalyptic type, positing the ultimate victory of the globalist conspirators, as in the quote from Alex Jones at the top of the article. Humanity is crushed, even wiped out, through the machinations of the New World Order. Boyer charts how the postwar development of

international governance bodies and financial agencies led Christian millenarian writers in the US to be increasingly concerned with global conspiracy, focusing on the United Nations and the Trilateral Commission (1992, 263-72). A hidden evil force can also help to explain away the failure of the end-times to arrive (Barkun 2003, 3).

During the 1990s, a number of right-wing conspiracist narratives began to appear in the New Age milieu (Goodrick-Clarke 2002, 299). The influence seems to have been mutual, however, as conspiracist prophecy has increasingly included predictions of an immanent “global awakening” (Ward & Voas 2011, 112). In these narratives, the apocalyptic eschatology is replaced by a millennial eschatology in which the world is remade, rather than destroyed. These narratives see the growth of millennial conspiracism as indicative that the masses are beginning to “wake up” to their enslavement, and predict the imminent deposition of the conspirators, adding a more hopeful, even Utopian, narrative to popular conspiracism. This idea of an immanent “global awakening” has, in the work of David Icke and others, allowed for a hybrid of conspiracist millennialism and New Age to develop (Barkun 2003, 173-4).

Alex Jones' output lies somewhere between these two polarities: alongside the dire apocalyptic predictions of Endgame, he makes frequent exhortations as to how humanity is “waking up” and will ultimately overcome their oppression. Both types of prophecy are central to his popular appeal.

Alex Jones

Jones was born in 1974 in Rockwall, a well-to-do suburb of Dallas, Texas. While he was at high school, Jones claims to have seen local police dealing cannabis to some of the pupils. Not long afterwards, he was stopped while driving, and accused the officer of corruption, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, elicited an angry response. The family moved to Austin to avoid further trouble; the Rockwall Sheriff was indicted on organised crime charges two months later (Zaitchik 2011).

Around this time, Jones read *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* (1971) by Gary Allen, which outlined the New World Order conspiracist narrative (Zaitchik 2011). Allen was a representative of the John Birch Society, a well-known, though secretive, conservative activist group. They were founded in 1958 by Robert Welch, a businessman and

sometime politician, with the intention of organising and mobilising conservative opinion (Schoenwald 2001, 62). By 1960, they had between 20,000 and 100,000 members (Ibid 64). Their small government and anti-federalist rhetoric was remarkable only for its elaboration into a fully-developed conspiracist narrative which saw communists attempting to undermine the American libertarian project (Wilcox 1998, 432). In Welch's view, the only explanation for what he saw as the decline of the US was that the federal government, and in particular President Eisenhower, were active communist agents acting against the interests of the US citizens, attempting to establish a centralised global New World Order (NWO) (Schoenwald 2001, 71-3). NWO conspiracism can be understood as an amplification of 19th Century Illuminati narratives, where the conspirators do not merely influence the state, but actively create it.

The book's themes seem to have resonated with Jones' suspicion of widespread corruption and abuses of power by representatives of the State. These suspicions were confirmed to him in the spring of 1993 when the BATF siege of the Branch Davidian compound began in Waco, two hour's drive from Jones' home. "I remember... seeing that famous footage of the [B]ATF loading their video cameras before going in... They were going to lose their funding. This was [a] PR stunt" (Kay 2011, 16). According to Kay, the impact on Jones was such that by the time of the Oklahoma City bombing two years later, he was already presenting and producing his own public access television programme, moving into radio a year later (*Ibid.*).

Although the John Birch Society are considered right-wing (Stone 1974, 184), Jones' political position is somewhat more complex. Rejecting the terms conservative and Republican, he instead refers to himself as a Libertarian or "paleoconservative", in other words identifying with the ideology of the founders of the constitution, rather than the more neo-conservative agenda of the present Republican party. He considers both Republican and Democratic parties to be equally working for the agenda of the globalists: "Ignore the right or left wing, study the brain of the bird" (Ziatchik 2009). Jones' overarching theme is that a "global elite" is covertly attempting to consolidate power in their hands to form a World Government, the New World Order. Gun control legislation, the fluoridation of drinking water, measures to curb global warming, the 9-11 attacks and the stock market collapse of 2008 are all taken as evidence of this

centralisation of power. The elite - identified as the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, the Council for Foreign Relations, and others - intend to seize the wealth of every country in the world, and instigate a eugenics programme aimed at decimating the world's population.

These themes are most succinctly delineated in Jones' parallel career as a filmmaker. His early films, such as *America: Destroyed by Design* (1998) were concerned with the immanent takeover of the US by NATO and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Authority), and its subsequent absorption into a global socialist superstate. One mechanism allegedly used to achieve this are what Jones' terms as *false-flag* operations - attacks which, although apparently by the enemy, are in fact by the home power. Two films responding to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, his own *9-11: The Road to Tyranny* (2002), and Dylan Avery's *Loose Change: Final Cut* (2007), which he co-produced, argued that the attacks were false-flag actions carried out in order to pass the Patriot Act to give the President (and therefore the NWO) the power to act without the approval of the Senate or House, and for citizens to be held indefinitely without charge. Indeed, his on-air accusations of Bush's complicity in the 9-11 attacks, made on the day, led to him losing syndication on a number of radio stations (Zaitchik 2011).

Jones became more widely known in the conspiracist milieu after he and an assistant covertly entered Bohemian Grove, a 2,700-acre private camping ground in California belonging to an exclusive club made up of some of the world's most powerful politicians and businessmen. His footage of the opening ceremony, known as "The Cremation of Care", which he claimed shows a Satanic ritual including a mock human sacrifice before an enormous owl statue representing Moloch, was widely disseminated on the Internet (Ronson 2001, 301-37). His rise was further helped by his relentless courting of celebrities, with country singer Willie Nelson, rapper KRS-1 and former wrestler and Governor of Minnesota Jesse Ventura having appeared on his radio show or in his movies. Given that he had previously called him a "con-man" (*Ibid.*, 86), the frequency with which Icke appears on his show may also be considered as taking advantage of his notoriety. Most recently, Charlie Sheen's public breakdown, which led

to his being fired from the popular CBS show *Two and a Half Men*, began during his interview on the Alex Jones Show broadcast on the 24th of February 2011.

Alex Jones' use of Prophecy

Jones' tone is that of a southern preacher, capable of rising to a fever-pitched, impassioned rant. At other times, he evokes the embattled messiah of Matthew's Gospel; "People laughed at us, and now it's all coming true. Even though I'm sick of doing this, I do it anyway. Somebody's got to do this" (Kay, 18). He played a preacher in two Richard Linklater films, 2001's *Waking Life* (2001) and his adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), in which he rants into a bullhorn before being bundled into an unmarked car.

Jones is at the more lucid end of the conspiracist spectrum, eschewing discussions of UFOs, crop circles or paranormal phenomena, and the use of channelled sources *a la* lcke and others. His claims are generally referenced with mainstream media sources, albeit filtered through his particular world-view. In the typology presented by Barkun in this volume, Jones would be a prophet of the second type who discovers "signs of the times" in the events of the day. But in order to be seen as a successful prophet, Jones predictions are re-interpreted and re-prioritised on an ongoing basis. I will demonstrate this by examining two of his apparently successful prophecies; the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and the present financial collapse.

The claim is frequently made by Jones and his followers that he "predicted 9-11" (Kay, 17). Like many of Jones' interpretations, this is not *strictly* accurate. The following transcript is from the broadcast in question, on July 25th, 2001:

America is the shining jewel the globalists want to bring down, and they will use terrorism as the pretext to get it done... Call the White House, tell them we know the government's planning terrorism, we know Oklahoma City and the Trade Center were terrorism, we know the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to blow up airliners... If you do it, we're going to blame you, 'cos we know who's up to it. Or if you let some terrorist group do it, like the World Trade Center, we'll know who to blame.

Jones' prediction, then, is of an immanent (though not date-specific) false-flag attack on the US, possibly involving the blowing up of US planes, and likely blamed on Osama Bin Laden. His references to the World Trade Center, however, are to the 1993 bombing as an example of a previously occurring false-flag attack, not the nature of the predicted attack. An attack did happen that autumn, for which Bin Laden was blamed; that much is true, but nothing else can be taken as correct, however, unless one accepts *a priori* that the attacks were a false-flag operation. To those who believe that bin Laden was indeed responsible for the attack, Jones prophecy was a failure. Therefore, to suggest that the prophecy is evidence that 9-11 was a false-flag attack, as Jones does, is a logical fallacy. Nevertheless, this example demonstrates that Jones is prepared to re-interpret his own words in order to be seen as having prophesied the attacks.

Another example of Jones' re-interpretation is to be found in the prophecies made in his 2009 film, *Fall of the Republic, Vol. 1: The Presidency of Barack H. Obama*. In late 2011, prisonplanet.com included a news story intended to remind readers of how the crucial issues covered in it – the bankrupting of the U.S. economy by offshore banksters and the unswerving implementation of a scientific dictatorship – are now coming to pass as Jones predicted in 2009.

The film argues that Obama is the agent of a globalist elite whose aim is to “destroy national sovereignty and individual independence” (Jones 2009). He outlines the Obama administration's close links to Wall Street, and argues that despite a campaign predicated on the slogan, “Change”, Obama has continued or even amplified the policies of his Republican predecessor, George. W. Bush, including extending the Patriot Act and continuing the incarceration without charge of the inmates at Guantanamo Bay. Obama's intention, Jones argues, is to continue the transfer of US power and wealth into the hands of off-shore international banks, owned by the global elite. The second half of the film outlines this in some detail, particularly in regards to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and global warming, which Jones believes is a myth created in order to implement new forms of taxation. Ultimately, he predicts that the present economic crash will “make way for a global currency and a new bank of the world” (*Ibid.*).

Again, the success of Jones' prophecies depend largely on whether you agree with him to start with. The U.S. economy has not, to date, been declared bankrupt or had its credit rating downgraded, nor has a global currency been put in place. The success claims of his prediction of a "scientific dictatorship" can only be considered in any way accurate with reference to events in Europe, specifically the installation of unelected "technocrat" leaders in Spain and Italy (D. Campbell 2011). Again, we see that Jones is willing to exaggerate his prophetic "successes" and de-emphasise his inaccuracies in order to portray himself as a successful prophet.

Jones' prophecy is strongly resilient to time; indeed, he's been making generally the same predictions since his career began in 1995. His broadcasts tell his audience on a daily basis that today is the worst things have been, and the New World Order takeover is kicking into a higher gear; for example, at the end of 2011, Alex's website declared that now "the mega-banking elite switches into overdrive to implement their world government totalitarian system". Yet he made essentially the same claim in his first film, *America: Destroyed by Design* in 1998. Despite the fact that the only prophetic successes he can claim are relatively minor and, as we have seen, tenuous, his prophecy rolls on.

For many, Jones' vision of the imminent enslavement of the many by the few will seem pessimistic in the extreme. It is tempered, however, by a more hopeful narrative concerning a developing "global awakening". Jones interprets his growing audience, the increasing prominence of conspiracist narratives in mainstream media and recent events including the Arab Spring and the worldwide Occupy movement, as signs of an acceleration in the numbers of those "waking up" to the globalist conspiracy:

We'd like to present an overview of issues demonstrating that all is not lost. Just the opposite, in fact. The powers-that-be have admitted that they are scrambling for purchase amid humanity's global awakening. This new knowledge has led to an increasing number of people being exposed to alternative information that questions the official version of events, and the underlying secret mechanisms of control. This worldwide wake-up call has led to a great many conspiracy theories becoming conspiracy facts.

Introducing David Icke on his radio show in late 2011, he said:

David Icke, ladies and gentlemen, on how we're winning, how we're going to win, how the false reality is being lifted, the curtain is being lifted, and we are going to win. Resistance is victory.

It seems that, for Jones, we are always living in the end times, where it is simultaneously the critical moment for both the conspirators' plans, and the cusp of the "global awakening". As such, his work consists of what I will call *rolling prophecy*, in which his prophecies are being updated, reinterpreted and replaced on a daily basis. Rolling prophecy allows Jones to emphasise apparently successful prophecies while de-emphasising the unsuccessful, and thus appear as a successful prophet. The apparent success of his prophecies about 9-11 and Obama lead his audience to give credence to his larger predictions about a coming totalitarian global super-state, despite their logical failings. Jones' prophetic failures, however, such as the prediction of immanent attack on Iran in *Endgame*, are quickly and quietly dropped. Jones' rolling prophecy thus remains in a liminal state, neither proven nor disproven. The upshot of this is that the cognitive dissonance produced when date-specific prophecies fail is avoided.

What is the Appeal of Jones' Prophecy?

While prophecy is a prominent narrative in southern states, and Texas particularly (Boyer, 13), it would be a mistake to lay responsibility for Jones' prophetic persona entirely on his Baptist upbringing. There is a practical point to his prophesying; when he claims that he predicted 9-11, or that Obama would win the election, he is establishing his authority in the conspiracist milieu. The perceived success of prophecies discussed above brought him to the attention of a broader audience. Jones promotes himself as a man who is so "in the know" that he knows what's coming, therefore validating his overarching conspiracist worldview. If Jones can convince the audience that he is always right, and knows what's going on, he increases his authority and therefore his market share. While I do not suggest that Jones is deliberately using prophecy to raise advertising revenue, it is undeniable that Jones is a canny self-promoter, as demonstrated by his above-noted courting of celebrities. Infowars.com has

several employees and premises including a TV studio, and Jones is estimated to personally be worth \$5 million.

The value of Jones' prophecy for his audience, however, seems less obvious. What do people gain from believing in eschatological conspiracy theories? After all, most of Alex Jones' listeners haven't retreated to cabins in the mountains and become fully-fledged survivalists. Damian Thompson has argued that such high personal investment in inherently risky date-specific prophecies is, for most people, simply not cost-effective (2005, 26-7). He suggests this is the reason why date-specific "predictive" millennialism has been largely supplanted by "explanatory" millennialism, in which millennial narratives are used to analyse the events of the present day (*Ibid.*). Explanatory millennialism requires considerably less investment, as its interpretations of events is constantly shifting and therefore avoids the threat of the failure of a date-specific prophecy (*Ibid.*, 31). Importantly, explanatory millennialism is intended "not to provoke action but to make sense of the present moment in terms of an overarching scheme of history" (*Ibid.*, 27). It is therefore a form of social critique.

Jones' conspiracist narrative, then, is a secular form of explanatory millennialism, offering "a strikingly comprehensive critique of contemporary mass society as dehumanising and dangerously centralized" (Boyer 1992, 254). His prophecies of a "nightmare future" can be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*, describing what, the present situation would result in if allowed to continue unchecked. For his audience, this allows for the expression of a critique of the impersonal and unassailable structures of modern global capitalist society from which they may feel disenfranchised (Goodrick-Clarke 2002, 299).

Jones' conspiracism is a detailed description of why life for his audience and himself is not fair or deserved - specifically, because a small elite are secretly oppressing the masses. To put it simply, the appeal of conspiracist prophecy is that it presents a popular theodicy which addresses the perceived inequalities of contemporary society. A theodicy, simply defined, is an explanation of the existence of evil in the world and its uneven distribution, and is generally agreed to be one of the primary benefits of religions (Thompson 2005, 15). Colin Campbell summarised the function of a theodicy thus:

they should tell people what to think and feel about the world and about themselves, on what basis their own experience of life - and indeed existence in general - is 'fair' or 'deserved', and if predominantly undesirable, can be, or will be, 'compensated for' in due course (2001, 76).

Jones' more millenarian prophecies of "global awakening" suggest how this unfairness will be compensated for; through the overthrowing of the global elite, and the re-enfranchisement of the individual. Thus the conspiracist prophecy of Jones and others can be understood, at least in part, as an expression of Utopian ideals of how a more equal world might look (Fenster 2009, 225). Indeed, many of Jones' audience may see his actions as a form of resistance, helping to eventually avert these catastrophic visions of the future by changing the present.

Conclusion

From an examination of two of Jones' prophecies, I have demonstrated how prophecy operates in the conspiracist milieu. Rolling prophecy is used to create and sustain the impression of successful prophecy, while avoiding the cognitive dissonance of failed prophecy. Jones' rolling prophecy allows his prophecy to function primarily as a critique of the present day. Thus millenarian conspiracism functions primarily as a popular theodicy, explaining perceived social inequalities, and placing the blame for the suffering of its subscribers with the conspirators of the NWO.

Scholars generally think of prophecy as the currency of small, tightly knit religious groups, but this chapter has shown that it also operates in larger, more diffuse and secular contexts. With several conspiracist motifs presently at the forefront of popular political debate in the US and worldwide, Alex Jones and other millenarian conspiracists may already have influenced political discourse, and so understanding their appeal is of considerable importance. We are always living in the end times, but these prophecies of the future have much to tell us about our own times.

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