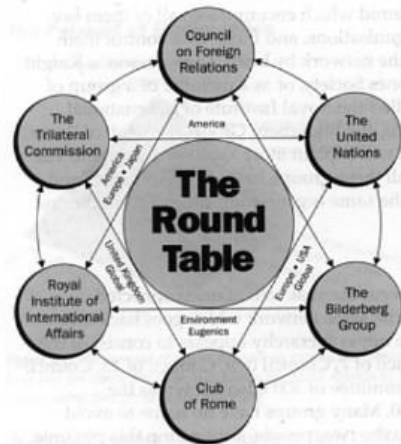


Part X – The Shift from an Industrial to a Planetary Civilization— On Conspiracy Narratives as Expressive of the Transition from the Nation-State to the Noetic Polity

by William Irwin Thompson

“We Irish think otherwise” Bishop Berkeley



Human intelligence is the product of a complex process of socialization. Beethoven, raised alone on a desert island, would not start to whistle in sonata form.

When global weather change caused a drying up of the African forests, the Pliocene primates had to come down out of the trees and run like hell to the next more distant clump before they got caught by a lion, or got caught evolving against their conservative will. Since there is safety in numbers, primates eventually found that clustering together was safer than the old way of life gibbons still have in the canopy of eating fruits and nuts off the high branches and hanging, in the short sight-lines of the forest, with your one mate for life.

Things got much more complex down on the ground. Some males were bigger and tried to hog all the females, and some sneaky political party types chose to hang around one big guy and get uppity but content to wait their turn. Females in turn banded together, gathered more food than the lazy guys, and as the council of Old Ma's they began to say how things should

be done and nag the slackers. To survive primates now had to know how to read faces and moods, how to deceive, and how to grab a quick copulation while the alpha male wasn't looking, or was off on a hunt or playing golf with his cronies. The ancestors of the Bonobos, however, opted for a more open and easy form of sexual group bonding and there the strength of the Old Ma's checked any alpha male attempt to monopolize the females. The result of all this Pliocene cultural complexity was a Baldwinian evolution of the brain that was now being called upon to do new things. In a "use it or lose it fashion," new skills became emphasized and passed on, both genetically and culturally.

A conspiracy theory is a form of group socialization. It creates a group with a new identity for those who feel left out in the communal sharing of the higher alpha male cultures beyond their reach. If you haven't gone to Harvard, been a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, made some money on Wall Street or K Street, but are simply a cowboy in Bozeman, Montana or a farm mechanic in Monte Vista, Colorado, then a conspiracy theory is your form of male-grooming in the barber shop. If you're smart enough to realize that everything you're being told in the major media is controlled by the owners of the media in New York and Los Angeles, then you start making up your own mythologies built on "us" and "them." When you accept that everything in the major media is bullshit, then you move to your own spot on the cultural playground, the internet, cable TV, or the hot air waves of car radio.

A conspiracy theory is an epistemological cartoon; it works through simplification and exaggeration, just like a political cartoon.

In 1963 the major networks used avuncular Walter Cronkite and Chief Justice Earl Warren to calm everybody down by insisting that a lone nut assassinated JFK, but I still remember how frightened Chief Justice Warren looked to me on TV and I wondered at the time if something so awful had happened that the public could never know and that what was motivating Warren et alia was the political need to convince us that the assassination was the isolated act of a lone nut and had no other meaning. First we were assured that talk of a Cuban conspiracy had been ruled out, but then slowly a domestic industry began to grow and promote an American conspiracy with Allen Welsh Dulles, the CIA, the FBI, and a contract outsourced by them to the Mafia, and then later another conspiracy theory surfaced that had to do with an Israeli-LBJ coup in support of Israel's atomic Dimona Samson Project. But all these weird stories were dismissed by sensible folks as just more "grassy knoll" fantasies. There is a sociology of knowledge to conspiracy theories as they seem to appeal to a class of the disaffected and the dispossessed, so no respectable urban or suburban middle class person wants to be identified with those lower class types with all their paranoid suspicions of government and wacko theories about the Philadelphia Experiment, Area 51, Roswell and UFOs.

The major media may say that the driver of Princess Di's car was drunk and speeding, but "the Arab Street" will say that MI6 messed with her car at the instigation of Prince Phillip because the Royals didn't want Princess Di giving birth to Dodi Al Fayed's kid and disgracing the monarchy with a Muslim bastard—a monarchy that also serves as Head of the Church of England. Even to this day, Iran's Ahmadinejad and his supporters thrive on conspiracy theories—especially those that point to imperial British and American oil companies, or the Jews and Mosad. Sheiks in Saudi Arabia still persist in publishing and distributing that old tired classic of paranoid conspiracy theories, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

And if Iran and Saudi Arabia are awash in conspiracy theories, Pakistan, with the presence of our CIA drones and Blackwater operatives, is completely underwater with conspiracy theories and Islamist paranoid narratives. The geopolitique has now become a war of narratives.

Since good and evil now are no longer described or contained by the boundaries of nation-states, the citizen is lost and suffers in his or her soul from terrifying ambiguities that only a conspiracy narrative can resolve. Americans cannot believe that they could do evil. But we live in a world in which good guys and bad guys are on all sides of every conflict. There are no good nations anymore simply because the nation is no longer the evolutionary form in which we really live. Cultural evolution has moved on, and now noetic plasmas of identity float like clouds everywhere in our planetary noosphere.

Conspiracy theories work as coherence theories and not correspondence theories of truth. They serve to create a world view for cultural groups, and do not need to correspond to objective facts. Actually, the theories are more effective if they are not true, for then allegiance to the group is affirmed. This is behavior similar to tests of gang loyalty in which the young aspirant is asked to commit a crime to prove his faith, his departure from middle class values, his consequent solitary vulnerability to the police, and his new need for gang protection.

A conspiracy theory is a horizon, one we can never approach, so it is absolutely critical in its formation that there never can be any possibility that we could ever know the truth. The more we run after the horizon, the more it keeps its distance. So to try to do the massive research to find out the truth—ah! that way madness lies, the gleam in the eye of the obsessed. Even in the case of old conspiracy theories about JFK, RFK, or Pope John Paul I and the Banco Ambrosiano, we will and can never know the truth. This inability to know disempowers us; it takes away our basic function as “informed citizens.” In elections now we can only know whom we like, and this instinctive resonance has more to do with identity and primal emotions than reason. In fact, people or candidates who seek to reason with us only confuse and alienate us. Americans would rather “swift boat” political candidates than reason together. If there is a conspiracy, it has to be coming from “them” and not “us.”

Consider our 9/11 conspiracy theories. The Arab Street says Mosad did it to create hatred of the Muslim world. A case of “them” not “us.” The Libertarians says it was “an inside job” and the Bush Administration did it to orchestrate its War on Terror, secure the Defense Policy Board’s long-planned invasion of Iraq, eliminate anti-oil industry environmentalist concerns, and increase general spending for the military-industrial complex. The goal was the take-over of Iraq abroad and at home a de facto declaration of martial law and reduction of civil liberties through the Patriot Act. This narrative is a basically a populist reaction, another case of “us” and “them.”

But notice how in our overheated global polity suffering from information-overload and cultural disorientation, society breaks up and reverts to old identities of dominance and authority. Left and Right no longer describe the opposing sides of a discursive parliament. Both radical left and libertarian populist right are against the Bush elites. No matter how hard George W. worked to take on a Texan accent and a cowboy stance and walk, the radicals and libertarians saw his daddy and the CIA behind him.

In spite of an upswelling of popular sentiment against Bush and Cheney in the election of Obama, this new radical left and libertarian right now notice a blunting of his liberal campaign, and a continuation of the Bush/Cheney's oil industry and gas pipeline military policies in Central Asia with Secretary of Defense Gates—a member of Papa Bush's administration.

Since the creation of the National Security State under seemingly populist Harry Truman, an inner government with its new institutions of the CIA and the NSA goes on no matter what the surface movements of public opinion reflect. Obama talked like a liberal in the campaign, but once in office he made nice with the bankers and Wall Street, then the medical insurance companies by abandoning a public option at the outset, and now he continues the geopolitique of the military and defense industries in Central Asia and soldiers on with the "Great Game" of containing Iran, Russia, and China. The Patriot Act has not been repealed, and yet the radical right is screaming against Obama as if he were a Socialist when he is anything but a member of the left. Whatever Obama is, the birthers, tea party anti-socialists know that he is not one of "them." Thus the oscillation of Bush as a Texan folksy anti-intellectual and Obama as an African-American double Ivy League graduate and Professor of Constitutional Law does indeed seem like a costumed game of opposed colors: the Dallas Cowboys vs. the New England Patriots, but a game in which both sides underneath are pretty much the same kind of NFL team owned by its sponsors.

Such a maddening situation in which an invisible Directorate of bankers and industrialists is more powerful than the Electorate is the perfect climate in which to grow paranoids and conspiracy theorists. Since no ordinary citizen is privy to the information he or she would need to make an informed judgment about world affairs, the murky landscape is ideal for seeing bad guys lurking behind the Bushes.

Boil butter and it breaks into white fat and golden ghee. In ancient Vedic yoga, this humble metaphor has been used as a metaphor of the Tantric process of illumination. One removes the fat to obtain the clarified elixir of ghee. If one aborts the process by stopping the cooking with kundalini, then the cooled magma does not become normal butter again but a congealed and ugly mass of fat and bubbles of golden elixir.

Apply the metaphor to a polity and it means that when a society is stressed and fearful, it will break apart and seek to revert to the primitive and primate politics of the dominant alpha male—the messiah or Mah'di that can deliver us from evil—and the politics of the golden elixir of enlightenment. But the yogi that cannot achieve enlightenment and individuation worships his guru all the more and turns the ashram into a cult.

So you can see that we are at an evolutionary, and not simply a political crisis. Either we remove the globs of fat to achieve the clarified golden elixir of illumination, or we consolidate into some Christian fascist copy of Iran.

The more the owners of the media create an illusory phony world—a Plato's Cave like The Truman Show or the TV series The Prisoner—now being re-issued for a new conspiratorial generation—the more we will see conspiracy theories mushrooming all around us. And those who chew on these mushrooms will have their Technicolor visions of secret cabals and the Federal Reserve and will join seemingly know-it-all cults and small political parties.

We no longer live simply in nature; we live in a second nature of information. Given the information-overload of electronic society, the confused soul projects coherence by connecting the dots in patterns that come from his or her own emotionally supported *idée fixe*. Given the vastness of the noosphere, we need to live in a comforting TV set of a Mr. Roger's or Sesame Street neighborhood. Conspiracies are the new noetic congregations that express the shadow-side of the cultural transition from the territorial nation-state to the global ecology of noetic polities based upon identity through states of consciousness.

A.E. warned us that "we become what we hate," so we had better be careful, for were we to adopt the Neocon strategy of using tactical nukes to take out Iran, we would, in our political seizure, become like Iran. Therefore this conflict between the American Republic of the Enlightenment and the Iranian Islamic Republic is an archetypal one for the new millennium, a conflict in which there are good guys and bad guys on both sides. We're in a box when we can't see that we are really in a tesseract. Anything less than the politics of Enlightenment now will get us into big trouble. Human cultural evolution has just raised the stakes and bet the whole pot of the accumulated chips of human history.