

Silver Bullets and Seed Banks

A Material Analysis of Conspiracist Millennialism

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how millennial (and apocalyptic) prophecy in contemporary conspiracy theory culture is both constructed from, and in turn produces, material things. Influential radio host and filmmaker Alex Jones (b. 1974), constructs his prophecies of imminent “Fall of America,” engineered by a shadowy cabal of Satan-worshipping socialists, from material things—ammunition purchases, birth certificates, chemtrails and extreme weather. At the same time, his prophecies in turn nurture an industry producing water filters, “seed banks,” and freeze-dried food for the “preppers” who would survive—material expressions of their millenarianism. These processes illuminate how material concerns actively construct worlds of belief, whether religious or apparently secular.

KEYWORDS: material religion, Alex Jones, millennialism, conspiracism, alternative healthcare

This article interrogates contemporary conspiracist millennial narratives from the material religion point of view. Since the publication of David Morgan’s agenda-setting *Visual Piety* (1998), the “material religion” approach has quickly become a popular methodology in Religious Studies, with numerous edited volumes, conferences and a journal devoted to the subject.¹ The material religion

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approach proposes that by studying the specific physical objects involved in religious behavior, scholars avoid focusing exclusively on textual sources and abstract theological systems. As such, the approach seeks to decentralize the locus of analysis from the elite, the intellectual, and the supposedly transcendent, towards the everyday, the physical, and the practical. The material religion approach is therefore an attempt to refocus the academic study of religion on the study of human behavior.

Nevertheless, there have been criticisms that the material religion approach is frequently used as “phenomenology by stealth,” a position with which I have much sympathy; a good deal of the research presented under the rubric soon slips into talk of how objects “manifest” religion, or “embody the sacred.”² What is being manifested, embodied? Certainly nothing strictly material. This is ironic and unfortunate, as one of the stated aims of the approach was to enable us to sidestep the problematic tendency towards *sui generis* conceptions of religion:

Materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it. . . . Religion is not a pure realm of ideas or beliefs that are translated into material signs. The material study of religion avoids reifications that identify ideas or dogmas or individual people as the irreducible core of religion. Instead, a religion is inseparable from a matrix or network of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places, and communities. One might say that the operation of this network is the production of a life-world and that religions are powerful ways in which worlds act and maintain themselves.³

My interest, however, lies in the opportunity that the material approach offers to avoid—or at least, problematize—the hegemony of “belief” in discussions of religion. Building on Bruno Latour’s work,⁴ I approach “belief” as a relational idea: “[r]ather than merely a set of creeds or propositions to which one assents, belief may be materially understood as a configuration of material things, practices, individual bodies, and social bodies.”⁵ From this point of view, “belief” is simply one’s understanding of how the world works, based on one’s experiences and habits—an “embodied epistemology,” as it were.⁶ Indeed to privilege “religious convictions” as belief over other types of knowledge is implicitly to take part in a *sui generis* discourse.

Today, arguably more than ever, human experiences are constructed from and result in material objects, and particularly economic activity. Conspiracism, like religion, is generally discussed as a matter of belief—specifically, belief in occluded agencies. Scholarly approaches

to conspiracism are based in almost every case on asking the question—why do people believe such strange things? For Richard Hofstadter, the cause was paranoia; for Frederic Jameson, it was a lack of cognitive faculty.⁷ Yet as suggested above, I consider it more helpful to consider such beliefs to be a rational product of the experiences engendered by the life-world of the subjects. Approaching millennialist conspiracism through the material lens, therefore, presents us with an opportunity to avoid such patronizing assumptions, and demands that we avoid the terminology of belief, and rather think in terms of knowledge—or knowledges. By sidestepping the issue of belief through the material approach, we can begin to conceptualize conspiracist prophecy not as a set of aberrant beliefs, but rather as a particular way of *knowing*, an epistemology, mediated through the material world. The material religion approach assumes that this epistemology embodies “human relations to the powers whose invocation structures social life,”⁸ but if these invoked powers may be malevolent as well as benevolent, then this strategy applies equally well to studying conspiracist epistemologies as to religious ones.

The material religion approach also stresses the importance of trade—religion as an economic activity. This aspect of contemporary conspiracism has been hitherto altogether neglected. Yet an examination of the transfer of symbolic capital into economic capital—and vice versa—offers a way into understanding the power dynamics of the millennial conspiracist field. Specific ideas about the world are inferred from economic activity, and in turn engender economic activity—even when those ideas are deeply critical of the hegemony of economic concerns.

This article is in two parts. In the first, I present some examples of how conspiracist prophecies and millennialism are constructed primarily from mundane material things, rather than complex decodings of biblical texts or channeled messages from outer space, as might commonly be thought. Secondly, I present examples of how this way of understanding the world in turn expresses itself materially, in a marketplace of products aimed at the modern apocalyptic consumer. In both cases, examples are drawn from the work of influential radio host and filmmaker, Alex Jones (b. 1974). Jones constructs his prophecies of the imminent “fall of America,” engineered by a shadowy cabal of Satan-worshiping socialists, from material things: ammunition purchases, birth certificates, chemtrails, extreme weather. At the same time, his prophecies nurture an industry producing water filters, “seed banks,” and freeze-dried food for the “preppers” who would survive—material expressions of their millenarianism.

Before I can apply this material methodology to millennial conspiracism, however, I must take some time to outline for the unfamiliar reader the field of millennial conspiracism and Alex Jones’ role in it.

ALEX JONES AND CONTEMPORARY MILLENNIAL CONSPIRACISM

Although generally considered religious phenomena, teleological narratives and prophecy are widespread in the conspiracist milieu. This may be because identifying a conspiratorial Other and their supposed “plan” necessarily leads to extrapolating that plan into the future, as “[c]onspiracy theories locate and describe evil, while millennialism explains the mechanism for its ultimate defeat.”⁹ Traditionally, these teleological narratives have been *apocalyptic*—i.e. positing an impending destructive teleology—predictions of the imminent enslavement of society by one or another hidden, all-powerful group. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these were typically constructed as groups such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati, often with an anti-Semitic element, but these were generally replaced (or sometimes combined) with more vaguely constituted ideological groupings like Communism and Zionism in the post-war period. In the 1970s, following the Watergate scandal’s exposure of high-level corruption in the United States government and the Church Committee Report on the activities of the intelligence services, conspiracist narratives were increasingly adopted by the political left as well as the right.¹⁰ Since then, conspiracist prophecy has also increasingly included more *millennial* (i.e. transformative rather than destructive) declarations of a looming “global awakening,” wherein the mass of humanity will realize their enslavement and overcome their oppressors.¹¹

There are a number of major sites for the dissemination of these narratives, each of which represents slightly different concerns and demographics.¹² This article, however, focuses primarily on Texas-based broadcaster and filmmaker Alex Jones, often described as the world’s most popular and influential conspiracist.¹³ The Alex Jones Show is presently broadcast for 3 hours or more each weekday, and 2 hours on Sundays, through some 63 AM and FM radio stations in the United States and the Internet.¹⁴ Although exact audience figures are probably impossible to ascertain due to the multiple, ever-changing and often ephemeral outlets, Jones claims 11.5 million unique hits per month.¹⁵ Jones’ primary website, infowars.com, is around the 500th most popular in the United States and approximately the 1500th worldwide.¹⁶ He has also pursued a parallel career as a documentary filmmaker. His early films, starting with *America: Destroyed by Design* (1998), although firmly within right-wing Christian Patriot discourse, set out the themes which he would develop in his later and more successful films including *9/11: The Road to Tyranny* (2002) and *The Obama Deception* (2009). Although the cinematic techniques have become more sophisticated, at the basic level these films all argue that the United States (which Jones sees, perhaps predictably, as the last bastion of liberty) is

being secretly and deliberately compromised from within by members of a global conspiracy.

Jones has historically had links with the John Birch Society, an influential, secretive right-wing pressure group. Founded in 1958, their anti-federalist conservative position soon developed into a full-blown conspiracist narrative in which a communist New World Order (NWO) was attempting to derail what they saw as the United States' libertarian mission.¹⁷ Jones' interest in NWO conspiracism started with reading *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* (1971), by John Birch Society representative Gary Allen (1936–1986), and Jones continues to repeat aspects of that ideology. However, it would be wrong to portray Jones as a Republican demagogue; his output has been openly critical of both the Republican and Democratic parties and their recent presidents, and he today describes his political position as Libertarian or “paleo-conservative.” Indeed, Jones sees both parties as equally complicit in a grand conspiracy to destroy the United States from within. In Jones' grand narrative, the United States represents liberty, freedom, and a free market economy—the opposite of the conspirators' ideals—and therefore is the prime target and principal hurdle towards their totalitarian agenda. In the quote that follows, Jones outlines the agenda of the conspirators, who he refers to variously as “globalists,” “banksters,” or the NWO:

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 percent 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 unauthorized zones. No human activity is private. AI supercomputers chronicle and categorize 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 dehumanization, where the science of tyranny is law. A worldwide control grid, designed to ensure the overlords' monopoly of power forever. Our species will be condemned to this nightmare future, unless the masses are awakened to the new world order master plan and mobilized to defeat it.¹⁸

As Michael Barkun notes, not all prophets channel messages from postulated non-empirical beings; often they read the “signs of the times” in the events of the day.¹⁹ Jones is such a prophet. Although a committed Christian, his prophetic insights come from news stories, and he frequently states that anyone could and would come to the same conclusions if they only put in as much time as he has. As one of his advertisers

puts it, “You don’t have to be an Old Testament Prophet to see what’s going on all around.”²⁰

Jones’ prophesying is supported by his claims to previous successful prophecies, for example, that he “predicted 9/11.” Jones’ presentation of this as a prophetic success is dependent on a rather loose interpretation of his words, as well as an already-existing belief that the attacks were carried out by elements within the United States government and security services.²¹ On the other hand, his prophetic failures since 1999 have included a war between the United States and Russia in 2009 and staged terror attacks in the United States in 2010.²² In fact, Jones has been prophesying the forthcoming “Fall of America” for twenty years, each year declaring that we are closer than ever, yet the prophesied eschaton never seems to arrive, and Jones stays in business. Jones utilizes what I have described elsewhere as “rolling prophecy”;²³ because his prophecies are non-date specific, often rather vague, and disseminated through the relatively ephemeral medium of a daily radio broadcast, his inevitable occasional successes are emphasized and amplified, whereas the majority of his predictions are quietly dropped. As well as increasing his cultural capital and therefore his status within the milieu, the cognitive dissonance and potential disconfirmation of bounded, date-specific prophecies is avoided.

Despite the apocalyptic tenor of Jones’ predictions, however, there is ultimately a more positive millennial aspect to his prophecy. The more oppressed the masses become and the more open the conspirators’ actions, in Jones’ account, the more the masses realize their oppression, and therefore the more likely their resistance. Essentially, Jones argues that “the night is darkest before the dawn,” which allows him to continue to present news which seems to confirm his darkest predictions, while simultaneously presenting the overall picture as evidence of an imminent “global awakening.” In this, Jones exemplifies a millennial/apocalyptic dialectic that is typical of this milieu. This has also enabled him to court figures such as David Icke (b. 1952) who is a frequent guest on the Alex Jones Show, despite Icke’s openly anti-religious position and speculations—including, notoriously, that members of the NWO are at their highest levels reptilian extra-terrestrials—that might weaken Jones’ identification as a political commentator.²⁴

Nevertheless, Jones’ ideas are popular. A Public Policy Polling survey published in April 2013 found that 28 percent agreed that a secretive elite is conspiring to rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or NWO, and 15 percent agreed the medical and pharmaceutical industries invent new diseases to make money.²⁵ Even Icke’s apparently outlandish reptilian thesis is apparently supported by 4 percent of respondents: that is, some 12.5 million people, given the current population of the United States.

Yet Jones’ prominence has provoked heavy criticism from some within the milieu and caused him to be accused of being “controlled

opposition,” that is, a paid disinformation agent who discredits reputable research by muddying the water with outlandish claims. Ironically, Jones has made the same claim of others on occasion, including David Icke.²⁶

Materiel . . .

I can now return to the material approach, and discuss how millennial conspiracist discourse is constructed from mundane things, and particularly from commercial concerns.

The claim that the conspiring elite acclimatize the masses for their future plans in order to preemptively avoid dissent is common; as the elite are inevitably implementing a plan, established long in advance, it would make sense that they are preparing ahead.²⁷ Indeed, much of the strength of conspiracist prophecy relies on the narrative that the elite are working from a plan and therefore their actions are simple to predict. It is frequently claimed that the conspirators will include clues to their agenda within the media—which is considered to be owned and run by the conspirators themselves. These clues are interpreted as signals to others within the conspiracy, insider gang signs, as it were, hidden in plain sight. Often though, it is claimed that these signs indicate that the programming in question is itself part of the agenda. According to this line of thinking, the media are used to acclimatize the masses to controversial ideas so that their eventual public acknowledgement will not create a strong reaction (a process which David Icke has named the “totalitarian tiptoe”).²⁸ For example, the claim that Illuminati symbolism could be read in the promotional material for the 2012 London Olympics was widespread, and it was extrapolated from this that the event would be used to stage a “false-flag” terrorist attack to usher in totalitarianism.²⁹ In these cases, a present day artifact is read as evidence of a prophecy *that has yet to happen*. Although unlikely to win new converts, this strategy seems to be very powerful in reinforcing already-held ideas. Alex Jones’ 9/11 prophecy above is an example; it only works if one already thinks 9/11 was an “inside job.”

Another recent illustration of this is the United States drone program. Although radio-controlled unmanned aerial vehicles were first used during World War I, robotic aircraft—called drones—were first employed by the United States Navy during the 1991 Gulf War. As well as having faster reactions than humans, robotic vehicles are considered particularly useful for carrying out tasks that would be dangerous or overly repetitive for human subjects. Obviously, this might include morally questionable actions.

In 2000, the Pentagon Armed Forces Committee mandated that by 2010, one-third of all front-line combat aircraft were to be unmanned,

and this period of rapid development was further encouraged by a massive increase in defense spending following 9/11. The Predator, one of the most widely used drones, is twenty-seven feet long, carries high-powered cameras for reconnaissance and laser-guided missiles, and costs a fraction of a manned jet. The Predator fleet grew from fewer than ten in 2001 to more than 150 in 2007, and is likely several times that figure today, but the Predator is only one variety of drone used by the United States military today. The forty-foot Global Hawk can carry out reconnaissance autonomously for up to thirty-five hours at a time, whereas the four-pound Raven is carried by ground forces and is used as a ready scout.³⁰ For many years the United States denied the existence of a program using drones to carry out targeted killings in Pakistan (a country with which the United States was not at war),³¹ but the story became public in 2012, with President Obama's public admission that the military were and a resulting Senate debate on the legality of such actions.³²

However, it turned out that the toy manufacturer Maisto was already producing a replica Predator drone. Conspiracists claimed that this product represented a desire to accustom the "sheeple"—the acquiescent masses—to the existence of the drone program, so that when it was announced there would not be an outcry. Even more insidiously, the adjustment process targeted children, which was taken as further evidence of the conspirators' ruthless mindset. The product's page on Amazon.com quickly and spontaneously became the site of the dissemination of a conspiracist critique of United States foreign policy, and of Barack Obama in particular:

This goes well with the Maisto Extraordinary Rendition playset, by the way—which gives you all the tools you need to kidnap the family pet and take him for interrogation at a neighbor's house, where the rules of the Geneva Convention may not apply. Loads of fun! (Maurice Cobbs, 11/1/13)

This is the best toy ever. Finally, I can pretend that I'm a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize! It's like I'm sitting right there in the White House with my very own kill list! (Raini Pachak, 4/1/13)

Now my kids can learn how to be a right-wing president that utilizes illegal and inhumane drones to kill innocent children in Pakistan! It's a great way to teach geography and politics. Hopefully my son will become a Democratic president that many center-left liberals worship even though he is more conservative than Reagan (Drewboy64, 12/1/13).³³

I stress that these are in no way atypical examples, and that I have selected only three here in the interest of brevity. Amusingly, the controversy over the toy seems to have led to Maisto ceasing production of it, and its price has increased from around \$8 to \$45 at the time of writing.

A second example is the recently popular narrative that the United States government has been stockpiling unprecedented amounts of ammunition. The story seems to have broken on 18 April 2012, through Jones' Infowars.com, although the original source was allegedly the "Market Watch" blog of the *Wall Street Journal*. Unfortunately the link is now dead and cannot be verified.³⁴ The article claims that the United States government had recently placed an order for 450 million rounds of hollow-point .40 caliber ammunition, primarily for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As the DHS is a domestic agency, Adams concludes that the ammunition is intended for use "against the American people."³⁵ This is backed up with claims that the DHS has previously purchased "tens of millions of dollars' worth of bullet-proof roadway checkpoint booths," "monstrous assault trucks" and "\$400,000 worth of potassium iodide pills—the kind of pills you take to avoid damage to your thyroid in the wake of radioactive fallout."³⁶ These claims are supported through links to stories on Jones' prisonplanet.com website. This story was circulated so widely that the agencies concerned responded through mainstream media outlets including Fox News,³⁷ stating that the ammunition was standard issue, needed primarily for training. Jones and Adams, however, saw this as direct evidence of an imminent armed takeover of the United States, and indeed, this story can be considered in continuity with the claim, popular in the right-wing militia movement since the early 1990s, that a series of camps designed to detain the government's critics had been built across the United States.

One of Jones' advertisers, Infidel Body Armor, explicitly appeals to this narrative. Their advertisement, running daily on the Alex Jones Show at the time of writing, declares:

The government's Department of Homeland Security is buying up loads of ammo. At the same time, they're restricting civilian's rights to own and purchase firearms. Can you put two and two together? Infidel Body Armor can stop every round, including hollow points and .308 sniper rounds, is reasonably priced and fully legal—but for how long?³⁸

There are two other features of note in this quotation. First there is the invocation of apparently irrevocable and eternal "civilian's rights." This calls to mind Bruce Lincoln's definition of "religious discourse" as that whose "concerns transcend the human, temporal and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status."³⁹ It is clear that the writer of this copy sees the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution—and particularly, the right to bear arms—as transcending the legislative purview of the present-day government. Secondly, and pertinently, the listener is exhorted to divine the future by "put[ting] two and two together" from present day reports concerning the ownership of ammunition and firearms.

... **To Material**

Let us now consider how these millennial conspiracist narratives in turn nurture an industry. The conspiracist marketplace addresses two concerns of their consumers: first, how can I avoid the machinations of the elite?, and what can I do if society does collapse? The first is answered by a range of products designed to prevent the individual from being controlled by the conspiracy through cleansing their body and environment of the toxins alleged to be weakening their immune systems, actively spreading disease, and stultifying their brains. The second concern is addressed by merchants who offer storable food, water, and other equipment designed to sustain the individual in the event of a collapse. We shall consider these in turn.

Jones' show is funded by advertising, both in the form of show sponsorship and prerecorded advertisements. These often feature Jones' voice, which can give the inattentive listener the impression that the endorsement is simply part of the main body of the broadcast. Furthermore, although not always made explicit, Jones' guests are frequently the producers or retailers of these products. Clear examples were the weekly appearances of Ted Anderson, through 2012, to discuss the economy in general and the price of gold bullion in particular. Anderson is not only a gold bullion dealer through Midas Resources, but the owner of Jones' network, Genesis Communications Network. Anderson's appearances extolled the unlimited growth potential of gold bullion as the market boomed towards \$1900 an ounce in August 2011, but he has appeared with considerably less frequency since the value collapsed back to below \$1000 in May 2013.

Jones' advertisers have in common a concern with removing environmental toxins from the body—or preventing them from entering in the first place—toxins which have been deliberately placed there by the so-called globalist elite, as per Jones' overarching narrative. These toxins allegedly enter the body of “we the people” through vaccines, through unnecessary prescription drugs, through processed and genetically modified food, and through the water system in the form of fluoride. Jones and his ilk claim that these toxins are intended to weaken the immune systems of the population in order to ultimately reduce the population, as well as lowering energy and mental clarity in order to prevent dissent. As Jones puts it, “You can't stand against the machine if you're sick, tired, and obese.”⁴⁰

Mike Adams, who goes by the handle of the “Health Ranger,” is a regularly featured guest. Although his website, naturalnews.com, is presented as an alternative health website featuring “holistic” and “green” imagery, it is an active promoter of conspiracist narratives with a right-wing leaning. A particular target is vaccinations, and Adams goes beyond the well-known but discredited claim linking them to autism to

claim that they cause cancer and AIDS. Adams is also a keen proponent of the narrative that fluoride is added to municipal tap water to stultify the population, rather than to prevent tooth decay. This narrative originated with the John Birch society, although they now deny having made the claim.⁴¹ Nevertheless, according to the Policy Polling website as mentioned above, 9 percent of the United States population agreed that the government adds fluoride to the water supply for reasons other than dental health.⁴²

Several of Alex Jones' sponsors directly address this narrative, however. The Berkey Guy, who offers a range of water filters manufactured by Berkey through the website www.directive21.com, has been a regular advertiser for a number of years. The website address refers to Homeland Security Presidential Directive number 21, which calls for public and private healthcare facilities and organizations to make preparations for disasters, taken by many conspiracists as meaning that the President was preparing for military action in the United States.⁴³ Another water filter company, Propur, also sponsors and sells through the Infowars website. A major selling point seems to be that their filters can remove fluoride, including "up to 95 percent of hydrofluoric silicic acid, the most common form of fluoride in tap water." Although water filters are relatively common among health discourses, it is the prominence given to fluoride here which is telling—the filters are being sold as specifically addressing the presence of fluoride, rather than more general concerns about the cleanliness of municipal tap water. The motif that municipal water fluoridation has a nefarious intent is a well-established point of confluence between right- and left-wing conspiracist discourses. Recently, the claim that the Nazis instigated fluoridation has become popular, part of a larger narrative that sees the NWO as a continuation of Hitler's project—instigated, it is said, by the same group of conspirators.⁴⁴

As well as carrying commercial ads, Jones has always marketed his own products through infowars.com, including DVD copies of his films and clothing branded with the various Infowars logos. He has also occasionally offered healthcare products from other manufacturers, including the Youngevity range of vitamin supplements. These seem to have been successful, and in 2013 Jones launched his own range of products, marketed through a spin-off site, www.infowarslife.com. Each of the products offered address Jones' conspiratorial concerns in different ways. They include Super Male Vitality, a mix of herbal extracts intended to counteract declining energy and sexual potency in males, whether through age, ill health, or the deliberate toxification of the environment. Jones claims that he uses it "to maximize vitality when working up to 12 hours a day or more in the fight for freedom"⁴⁵; an ad on the Alex Jones Show reports "I wake up every day ready to fight these criminals . . . I look forward to taking my Super Male Vitality."

Silver Bullet is the Infowars proprietary suspension of colloidal silver, that is, microscopic pieces of silver suspended in liquid. The use of colloidal silver as an alternative cure-all dates back to at least 1915, when G. L. Rohdenburg published an article claiming that it could reduce cancer tumors when taken internally. The Federal Drug Administration has rejected these claims, however. Its use can also cause argyria, a side effect of which is blue skin.

Infowars' proprietary "nascent iodine" product's relationship to the survivalist marketplace is clear from its name: Survival Shield. More prosaically, they also market a free-trade coffee, Wake Up America, available in both Patriot Blend and Immune Support Blend versions. Not only does the naming of the coffee reinforce the millennial/apocalyptic dialectic previously referred to, but by marrying coffee to the fight against immune deficiency, it supports the narrative that the NWO is deliberately working to depopulate the West by weakening immunity through fluoridation and immunization.

Typically, scientific studies that support these treatments are always given a prominent position in the advertising, while the majority that do not support them are dismissed as being fabricated to advance the conspirators' agenda. Such a tension between appeals to and rejection of scientific epistemological authority are typical of the milieu, what I have previously described as a strategic mobilization of authority.⁴⁶ Indeed, disagreement is *in itself* evidence of the conspiracy:

The only people who argue with this are those who are already mercury poisoned and thus incapable of rational thought. Mercury damages brain function, you see, which is exactly what causes some people to be tricked into thinking vaccines are safe and effective.⁴⁷

Underlying this mechanism is the attribution bias; whatever supports what one already thinks is more likely to be taken as true than that which challenges it. Of course, none of this matters if the NWO carry out their nefarious plan and society collapses. Dumbing down the population through fluoridation is, after all, only the first stage in the agenda. The "end-game," to use Jones' terminology, is the extermination of some 80 percent of the world's population. American right-wing conspiracism has long been connected with so-called survivalists, individuals who so fear such a collapse that they retreat to remote rural areas, often stockpiling weaponry. Recently, however, media outlets have carried articles on the growth of a class of urban survivalists who call themselves "preppers." Although their motivations are the same—to survive "when the shit hits the fan"—they tend to stockpile storable food and water, rather than weaponry, suggesting a broadening of the appeal of such narratives.⁴⁸ This is further evinced by the growth of a marketplace serving this demographic, to which many of Jones' advertisers appeal. One site,

www.Mypatriotssupply.com, advertises with the tagline “[y]ou don’t need to stand in a breadline if you have your own bread,” underlining the millennialist discourse, whereas Efoods Direct proclaims, “[i]f you listen to this, you know society is in freefall. . . .” There are even gluten-free survivalist stores.⁴⁹

Longer-term solutions are offered by www.survivalseedbank.com, which sells a vacuum-packed container of non-hybrid vegetable seeds. Perhaps tellingly, one of the varieties included is described as being “well adapted to southern heat and soils,” reinforcing the idea that conspiracist narratives are grounded in southern, Republican conservative political discourse.⁵⁰ The ads claim that the containers provide enough seeds to plant “a full acre crisis garden.” Ignoring for the moment that a “crisis garden” is not an expression encountered outside of this particular discourse, it would take months to establish such a food-producing plot, and that while seed is important, experience is more so. Moreover, the utility of non-hybrid seeds is that they can be resown from the seed produced by the adult plants, therefore allowing for a theoretically endless production of crops. This, however, moves the discussion into a timescale of years. Therefore we can be sure that these advertisers—and therefore their customers—are thinking not in terms of a temporary instability of the food infrastructure, but a long-term—possibly permanent—breakdown of the infrastructure of society itself. Such an idea, I have argued, has been inculcated and reinforced by material products being exchanged in an economic system.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Alex Jones’ teleological prophecy as a product of material concerns, which in turn have created a self-reinforcing material economy. Applying the material lens to this milieu reveals the economic and cultural dynamics of the field, and I argue that conspiracist teleologies are best understood as embodied epistemologies built from mundane factors, rather than irrational beliefs as the majority of previous scholarship has asserted.

In conclusion, I wish to ask what—if anything—this article on the economics of conspiracism has told us that might help us in conceptualizing religion? In *The Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Bruno Latour recounts a story of Portuguese explorers encountering West Africans and demanding to know if their deities—which we called totems—were “manufactured” or “real.”⁵¹ The point Latour is making, as I interpret it, is that scholars tend to describe “belief” when talking about “the Other,” but in talking about their own culture, they present self-evident “knowledge.” However, Latour challenges the idea that there is a boundary between knowledge and belief. Rather, the categories exist to demark “correct”

epistemology (“knowledge”) from “incorrect” epistemology (“belief”). Yet this critique has yet to filter down to the examination of conspiracism, nor in many cases to the study of new religions. Scholars overwhelmingly continue to study conspiracism from the point of view of aberrant beliefs, as they do when considering new religious formations.⁵²

Worlds—and words—of belief, whether religious or conspiratorial, are constructed from material things. They cannot be separated from the everyday world. When we try to do so, to ascribe naive beliefs to certain groups, we marginalize them. We cannot understand the appeal and dynamics of prophecy and conspiracism in the contemporary world unless we cease considering them as matters of “deviant knowledge” or “naive belief.” Despite the very real problems with how it is often utilized, the material religion approach may provide just such a methodology. Moreover, in considering religious and conspiracy narratives together, this article suggests a new and potentially useful approach towards understanding the dynamics between “religion,” “belief” and the broader cultural context.

ENDNOTES

¹ Material Religion was the theme of the 2013 British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion study group (SOCREL) conference in Winchester, where an early version of this article was presented.

² For example, Russell McCutcheon, “Working, not Wonking,” *Studying Religion in Culture* (13 December 2013), at <http://religion.ua.edu/blog/2013/12/working-not-wonking/>; accessed 25 August 2015.

³ Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine and S. Brent Plate, “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40 no. 3, (2010): 209.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.)

⁵ Meyer, Morgan, Payne, and Plate, “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” 209.

⁶ David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine* (November 1964): 77–86; Frederic Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 356 (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁸ Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture*, 8.

⁹ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.

¹⁰ Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 59–67.

¹¹ David G. Robertson, "(Always) Living in the End Times: The 'Rolling Prophecy' of the Conspiracy Milieu," in *Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist*, ed. Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe, 207–19 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

¹² Some examples include the Drudge Report (<http://www.drudgereport.com>) which collates news stories from multiple sources with a conservative agenda; UK-based writer and speaker David Icke (<http://www.davidicke.com>) who has a more left-wing political slant and distinctly holistic or "New Age" leanings; Mike the "Health Ranger" Adams' <http://www.naturalnews.com>, which is ostensibly an information site for alternative therapies, but also includes pieces on gun control and information surveillance; the radio talk show "Coast-to-Coast AM," primarily hosted by George Noorey, which features interviews with speakers on a range of topics from the conspiratorial to the paranormal, and has a large listenership in rural areas of the United States.

¹³ Alexander Zaitchik, "Meet Alex Jones," *Rolling Stone*, (2 March 2011), at <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/talk-radios-alex-jones-the-most-paranoid-man-in-america-20110302>; accessed 25 August 2015.

¹⁴ Zaitchik, "Meet Alex Jones."

¹⁵ Infowars, "Infowars Press Pack" (n.d), at http://static.infowars.com/ads/mediakit_public.pdf; accessed 21 May 2014.

¹⁶ "How Popular is Infowars.com," *Alexa*, <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/infowars.com>; accessed 25 August 2015. These statistics have remained more or less consistent since my research began in 2010.

¹⁷ Clyde Wilcox, "Sources of Support for the Old Right: A Comparison of the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade," *Social Science History*, 12 no. 4 (Winter 1998): 432.

¹⁸ Alex Jones, writer-director, *Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement* (2007).

¹⁹ Michael Barkun, "Messages from Beyond: Prophecy in the Contemporary World" in *Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist*, ed. Sarah Harvey & Suzanne Newcombe (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 17.

²⁰ "New Survival Seed Bank Lets You Plant A Full Acre Crisis Garden!" (n.d.); at <http://www.survivalseedbank.com/>; accessed 15 August 2014.

²¹ For a full explanation, see Robertson, "(Always) Living in the End Times," 207–19.

²² MarkB, "Forty-Five Failed Alex Jones Predictions," *Disinformation* (24 April 2013); at <http://disinfo.com/2013/04/45-failed-alex-jones-predictions/>; accessed 25 August 2015.

²³ Robertson, "(Always) Living in the End Times."

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²⁵ Jim Williams, "Conspiracy Theory Poll Results," *Public Policy Polling* (2 April 2013); at <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results.html>; accessed 25 August 2015.

²⁶ Jon Ronson, "David Icke, the Lizards, and the Jews," Channel 4 Television (UK), 6 May 2001.

²⁷ Although there are other cases, the most obvious example of such a plan is the notorious anti-Semitic fake, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. See David Redles, *Hitler's Millennial Reich* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) and Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). In recent decades, the *Protocols* have been rehabilitated as the Illuminati Protocols by authors such as David Icke and William Milton Cooper, supposedly stripped of the anti-Semitism while retaining the gist of the agenda.

²⁸ David Icke, *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster* (Wildwood, MO: Bridge of Love Publications, 2002), 19.

²⁹ For example, “2012 London Zion Olympics False-Flag Warning,” *The Atlantean Conspiracy* (March 4 2012); at <http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2012/03/2012-london-zion-olympics-false-flag.html>; accessed 25 August 2015.

³⁰ Peter W. Singer, “Military Robots and the Laws of War,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 23 (Winter 2009): 25–45.

³¹ Andrew Buncombe, “Obama Admits Use of Drones in Pakistan,” *The Independent* (1 February 2012); at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/obama-admits-use-of-drones-in-pakistan-6297655.html>.

³² John Podesta, “Obama Should Lift Secrecy on Drones,” *Washington Post* (13 March 2013); at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/john-podesta-obama-should-lift-secrecy-on-drones/2013/03/13/7e98d7ca-8a9b-11e2-8d72-dc76641cb8d4_story.html.

³³ Maisto Fresh Metal Tailwinds 1.97 Scale Die-Cast United States Military Aircraft, *Amazon*; at http://www.amazon.com/Maisto-Fresh-Metal-Tailwinds-Endurance/dp/B004JFMOGK/ref=sr_1_1?s=toys-and-games&ie=UTF8&qid=1411824681&sr=1-1&keywords=predator+drone; accessed 28 August 2014.

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³⁵ Mike Adams, “What’s the Government Buying these Days? Hollow Point Bullets, Hardened Checkpoint Booths and Radiation Pills,” *Natural News* (18 April 2012); at http://www.naturalnews.com/035607_government_checkpoints_Martial_Law.html#ixzz3A4f2iX7U.

³⁶ Adams, “What’s the Government Buying?”

³⁷ Fox News, “Agencies Tamp Down Speculation on Hollow Point Ammo Purchases” (17 August 2012); at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/08/17/agencies-tamp-down-speculation-over-hollow-point-ammo-purchases/>.

³⁸ Infidel Body Armor commercial, *Alex Jones Show* (15 August 2014); at http://rss.infowars.com/20140815_Fri_Alex.mp3; accessed 25 August 2015.

³⁹ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11th*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2006 [2003]), 5.

⁴⁰ This was the tagline of an advertisement for vitamin supplements that ran daily on Jones’ radio show from mid- 2013 until early 2014.

⁴¹ Robin Ramsey, “On Birchers Fluoride and Nazi ETs” *Fortean Times* 313 (April 2014), 15.

⁴² Williams, "Conspiracy Theory Poll Results."

⁴³ The White House, "Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-2" (18 October 2007); at <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/hspd-21.htm>; accessed 25 August 2015.

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⁴⁵ Super Male Vitality, *Infowars Store*; at http://store.infowars.com/Super-Male-Vitality_p_1227.html; accessed 11 October 2014.

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⁴⁷ Eric Barlow, "Natural News Tests Flu Vaccine for Heavy Metals, Finds 25,000 Times Higher Mercury Level than EPA Limit for Water," *Natural News* (6 June 2014); http://www.naturalnews.com/045418_flu_shots_influenza_vaccines_mercury.html; accessed 25 August 2015.

⁴⁸ Jessica Bennett, "Survivalism Lite," *Newsweek* (27 December 2009); at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/Newsweek/2009/12/27/survivalism-lite.html>; link no longer available 25 August 2015.

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⁵² For example, Quassim Cassam, "Bad Thinkers," *Aeon* (13 March 2015); at <http://aeon.co/magazine/philosophy/intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists/>; accessed 25 August 2015.