

The Tesla Genius:

Part 3: The substance of an unsettled legacy
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We have already seen that Nikola Tesla, in the visions from which he deduced the mechanism of alternating current, also intuited a basic law of Octaves governing universal energy.

— Robert Anton Wilson, 1977

The fascination for Tesla goes well beyond his personal genius, accomplishments, and charisma. In this article, some elements of his legacy will be examined, realizing that there are probably as many ways to relate Tesla's life and work to the modern era as there are people to react with their own opinions about him. However, I believe that there are three broad categories of the Tesla legacy which dominate current thinking about the Serbian-born genius. The first two parts of this series (*AJNP*, July, August 1987) dealt with more factual elements of Tesla's life (Part 1 was a biography, and Part 2 an analysis of his work), while this article must of necessity be abstract in generalizing the topics about to be discussed. The first broad category that I will define is the legacy of politics. Basically, Tesla became a reluctant symbol, a figurehead for the nationalistic movements in Yugoslavia. I will examine the essential historical themes, and then outline some of the post WW II, American and Yugoslavian politics that affected Tesla's reputation. Without elaborating at this time, the second generalization that I make about Tesla's legacy concerns the mystical and occult interest in Tesla insofar as use of his name or his philosophical beliefs. Finally, I will show that much of the interest in Tesla is for supporting some modern fringe sciences.

The conjunction of Tesla and politics strikes me as incongruous, for Tesla was a scientist, not a political activist. So why would Tesla become a "political football"? Some historical background is necessary to properly relate Tesla to certain political agendas. The region of Tesla's youth, known as Serbia, was shaking off the dominance of the Ottoman Empire during Tesla's formative years, only to be dominated by Austria-Hungary. This was one region of many that felt a strong surge of nationalism during the nineteenth century. Throughout his youth, Tesla had been tutored by his mother in nationalistic poetry, stories, and legends about Slavic Serbia. He developed pride in his heritage, and an appreciation for an independent Balkan region free from Ottoman or Austrian control. Yet, Tesla was more interested in pursuing his own goals in life. As far as Tesla was concerned, others would have to work-out the independence without his help. Such was the state of affairs when he arrived in New York during the mid-1880's. Even when Tesla returned to his homeland in 1892 to visit his mother just prior to her death, he didn't become personally involved in the rising nationalism of the region.

So, Tesla remained outside the political undercurrents, yet at heart, was sympathetic and emotionally tied to the traditional, orthodox, and independent Serbian ideals. As an aside, I believe that even though Tesla was a well-established American citizen at the outset of WWI, his Serbian heritage weighed against him with the German-American industrial interests that he sought out to promote his latest inventions. It was Serbia's conflict with Austria that triggered the war. While in the broad sense, the U.S. was politically sympathetic to Serbia, the industrial and financial powers in this country were tied to both British and German economies. And Germany, of course, was allied with Austria. It took several years of war

on the continent to sway industrial commitment entirely over to Britain, thereby isolating Germany from the U.S. economy. Yet, during that transition, Tesla was unable to interest the wartime bureaucracies and industries in his inventive ideas and prototypes. I suspect that Tesla was blacklisted by those men which at the start of the war favored German economic and industrial ties. If so, Tesla was certainly remaining politically naive. Yet, when following WW I a major part of the Balkan region, including Serbia, was consolidated into Yugoslavia (so named eleven years later), under the monarch, Peter I, Tesla offered considerable praise and verbal support for the new state. It is essential to realize that Tesla was quite happy with the monarchy, owing to his traditional upbringing by his mother.

Until the onset of WW II, nothing else really affected Tesla's political interests, or much affected his reputation. In her biography of Tesla, Cheney ([1981] 1983) develops quite well the moves and countermoves that made Tesla a symbol for the course of Yugoslavian history. Summarizing, Tesla's nephew, Sava Kosanovic, while in wartime exile in New York City, coerced pro-Yugoslavian statements from Tesla on behalf of the communist faction in Yugoslavia led by Tito. On the other hand, agents of the royalists, also in New York City, were also able to obtain supportive comments from Tesla to send to occupied Yugoslavia. The problem was that the prince regent, Paul, aligned his country with the Axis powers, and sometime afterwards the new king Peter II reversed the alliance. This triggered the invasion of Yugoslavia by Hitler, and the royal government went into exile. The communists under Tito took to guerilla warfare in the hills. So, the royalists were blamed for both the alliance with the Axis, and the subsequent invasion by the Germans. This gave the communists a tremendous political advantage in popularity. Tesla at this time at the end of his life, quite probably didn't care anymore, and couldn't understand the complexity of issues across the Atlantic. Both the royalists and the communist factions used Tesla as a rallying symbol for the wartime resistance movements in Yugoslavia.

Even after Tesla's death in early 1943, Tesla's nephew was able to make better use of his uncle's name, and Tesla became identified with the communists even though his personal sentiments were with the royalists. After Tito took over Yugoslavia, the reputation of Nikola Tesla in the U.S. suffered dramatically. In fact, the subject of his works was a virtual intellectual pariah even after the U.S. Supreme court declared Tesla the "father" of radio. Until a community of scientists and engineers formed the Tesla Society in time to promote and celebrate Tesla's centennial birthday in 1956, there was very little mention of Tesla (at least favorably) in the scientific/engineering literature. Only in the most recent decade has that same literature given Tesla due credit for his work in AC theory and technology. For example, Goodstein's *The Mechanical Universe* (1985) gives Tesla generous credit for his contribution to AC theory.

In his book, *The New Inquisition* (1986), Robert Anton Wilson decries the dogmatism of the official scientific community in their persecution of those maverick scientists who refuse to conform to some officially recognized arbitrary scientific agenda. In this context Wilson raises a couple possible solutions to why Tesla has not received his due recognition from within the scientific engineering community (Wilson 1986, 66):

Between the 1890s and 1910, he [Tesla] was one of the most respectable, successful and influential scientists of his time, and earned over \$1,000,000—a huge sum in those days. After 1910, all that stopped. Tesla's works were not burned, like Reich's; he was not imprisoned; he was not persecuted in any way. He merely became unfashionable.

For some reason, nobody would invest further in his research or his inventions. There is a great mystery about the Tesla matter, and he has become a hero—a cult-figure—to many parts of the counterculture. It is widely suspected that he was the victim of a commercial conspiracy, and that his proposed worldwide electrical grid would destroy all monopolies by making energy free to anybody who planted an antenna in their backyard....

Thus far, both communist sympathies and economic threats to the industrial status quo have been cited to explain the aversion to Tesla by the scientific/engineering community. Wilson offers one other possible reason (Wilson 1986, 66):

Nonetheless, Tesla was considered a genius by his contemporaries, and he has been ignored by the Citadel [scientific/engineering community, or more accurately, the military-industrial complex] for over 70 years now. One can only wonder why. It is interesting that Tesla, like Reich, was profoundly opposed to nuclear energy, and claimed that even in “peaceful” uses nuclear power was dangerous to humans. The people who finance the Citadel do not like that idea....

Wilson went on to suggest that Tesla’s case is similar to that of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer who fell from grace in the political scientific realm as a result of his stand against the hydrogen bomb.

Another broad area that Tesla has become associated with is that of the mystic or occult. Tesla himself, through his personal ritualistic superstitious practices and unusual visions, encouraged occult interest in him. In their biography of Tesla, Hunt and Draper ([1964] 1981) research Tesla and the occult to a great depth. They write, “He furnished grist for the believers in occult theories by seeming, at times, to subscribe to a fraction of their beliefs—such as his conviction that amber was a magic substance having the properties of electrons.... Tesla believed that Moses was undoubtedly a practical and skilled electrician far in advance of his time, ...Further, he made wide use of Biblical symbols” (Hunt and Draper [1964] 1981, 187). As Hunt and Draper subsequently point out, Tesla’s fantastic claims about such things as communications with the planet Mars, led two types of occult-believing people to identify with him. “On the one side were the sincere seekers of truth beyond the veil. On the other, were those who sought to use his name only to give their own schemes a semblance of validity for financial gain or notoriety” (Hunt and Draper [1964] 1981, 188). This section of Hunt and Draper’s book details the appearance of the work *Can a Man Live Forever?* which used Tesla’s name and damaged his reputation around 1900. This work was cited in the first article. Additionally, they write, “The years did not lessen the abuse of Tesla’s unique ideas. The promoters of cabalistic doctrines continued to put their own interpretation on his personality. Strange cults seized upon his every word and carried his ideas beyond any direction he had intended” (Hunt and Draper [1964] 1981, 192). Yet, part of Tesla’s appeal for the occult realm, was his very real manifested premonitions and visions. Concerning Tesla’s belief that he had contacted Mars while in Colorado in the year 1899, I believe that he may in part have been reacting to H.G. Wells popular serialization of *The War of the Worlds*, two years earlier. I notice that other scientists were enraptured by the story at the time, such as Percival Lowell, famous American astronomer and Mars observer, and young Robert Goddard, future pioneering American rocket engineer. In *COSMOS*, Carl Sagan says of Goddard, “...(who as a young man had read Wells and had been stimulated by the lectures of Percival Lowell)...” (Sagan 1980, 91). I believe that Tesla

(who was well read to begin with) was inspired to “jump on the bandwagon,” and made his own Martian commitments. Even if Tesla had detected a diurnal cycle of radio noise in Colorado, at best—due to the low frequencies employed and relatively poor detectors available—Tesla could only have observed some terrestrial atmospheric noise effects. It wasn’t until Carl Jansky had the right sophistication in radio technology, as recently as 1931, that radio astronomy could be realized. Jansky’s apparatus was as much improved over Tesla’s, as a DC-3 aircraft is over the Wright Brothers biplane. It seems to me that the occult interest in Tesla has increased dramatically over the last two decades—much beyond that which existed while he was alive. For example, Ruth Norman published a series of books called *Tesla Speaks* during the early 1970’s. Filled with rambling statements about “higher planes,” “vibrational energy,” “higher frequencies,” and Tesla’s now the “Overlord of the planet Muse; ...” (Norman et al 1975, 62 et passim). Mrs. Norman is a psychic medium and self-proclaimed visitor from (the planet) “Unarius” (That’s a word borrowed from Theosophy; in Norman’s context it means “Science of Life [!?”).

Robert Anton Wilson describes Tesla as a “secular shaman,” as he draws this comparison (Wilson 1977, 137).

Compare this with the experience of Gopi Krishna, a typical yoga adept.

1. Like Tesla, Gopi Krishna had a series of visions and illuminations over a period of years.
2. Like Tesla, Gopi Krishna simultaneously suffered a series of mysterious illnesses, almost died several times, and occasionally became *painfully sensitive to all sensations*.
3. After the final vision, Gopi Krishna became a psychic prodigy, able to write poetry in several languages which he couldn’t read or speak normally.

We seem to see same mutational process occurring in both cases, slightly modified by cultural influences. Take it on a broader scale:

1. In every tribe there are occasional shamans who are prone to visions and illuminations.
2. These shamans usually begin having their visions during or right after a prolonged illness which nearly kills them.
3. After recovery, the shaman has odd psychic abilities “wild talents,” as Charles Fort said.

Wilson’s broad comparison between Tesla and shamanism is to my mind the core of thought about Tesla with those who are sincerely seeking after true occult knowledge; whereas, Ruth Norman impresses me that she’s of the group of mystics and occultists which would use Tesla’s name to her advantage. For example, she allegedly converses with the spirit of Tesla, “[Tesla]: My heart has grown so large that I feel it is the lens that is comprising all the feeling that I’ve ever had and all times that we have had to be separated. [Norman]: I’m sure you must have had to just poke me down through the hole and practically step on my head to get me back down here in this dimension. [Tesla]: You know, that is what we have done to each other in times when I’ve been on the earth planes and you’ve been at home, ...” (Norman 1975, 36). I estimate that there are hundreds of similar lines of purported dialog between Norman and the spirit of Tesla. Tesla quite probably has a reputation and following in the occult realm and fringe sciences far beyond his actual scientific reputation during these last two decades.

The fringe sciences quite liberally use the name of Tesla to bolster their claims. The authority of the name and reputation of Tesla offers much to the fringe sciences, far beyond the name and reputation of any other famous scientist/engineer during the last century. For example, a fringe scientist would have a great deal of trouble using Einstein's work and reputation to support something that Einstein never got involved with in the first place. Einstein is too well known, understood, and conservative. Again, the same thing could be said about Edison as an engineer. Fanciful speculations made by Edison to the public were nevertheless conservative, limited, and credible. Tesla, on the other hand, was always saying and printing things about speculative sciences and technologies, though he rarely refuted any return polemics. Taken out of context, virtually anything that Tesla said could be applied with apparent validity to any fringe pursuit. For example, many modern fringe scientists use Tesla's assertions about the nature of death ray technologies to add some authority to their own claims about their own equipment. Others, fearing foreign menaces, use Tesla assertions about those death ray technologies to sound some dire warning about potentially successful results from foreign research—which yields some new super weapon; therefore, this country should also be heavily investing in similar lines of research to develop similar weapons first, or to develop some countermeasures. A good example of this seems to be Lt. Col. Tom Beardon's assertion that the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion was the result of a Soviet test firing of a scalar electromagnetic weapon. I'll quote a book review about Beardon's book *Fer-de-Lance: A Briefing On Soviet Scalar Electromagnetic Weapons* (the actual book is out of my budget and no library here has it): "The author contends that the Soviet Union deliberately destroyed the Arrow DC-8 on December 12, 1985, killing over 250 Americans. He also contends that the Soviet Union destroyed the Challenger space shuttle on January 28, 1986, the Titan 34D missile launch on April 18, 1986, and Delta rocket on May 3, 1986, virtually paralyzing the U.S. space program" (Tesla Book Co., Winter 1986 Catalog, p. 2).

Tesla himself is responsible for the scalar electromagnetic theory (which he initially called "stationary waves"). Tesla never did accept that the speed of light was the upper limit of velocity in the universe. He always thought that energy (and information) could be sent to its destination instantaneously using scalar (in lieu of transverse) electromagnetics. In addition, any energy so transmitted, would arrive with 100% efficiency. Tesla asserted that evidence of this phenomena had been discovered while in Colorado. Cheney cites modern-day physicists that are able to explain Tesla's observations using conventional electromagnetic theories (Cheney [1981] 1983, 141–151). If anything ever does result from a true discovery and use of scalar electromagnetic energies, it will likely be limited in its usefulness. Why? Because, if it really exists naturally (and it would have to) it doesn't interact strongly with the observable proximal reality. For example, if it's as hard to detect as neutrinos (which requires very expensive experimental apparatus), the economic resources required to produce a practical system based on scalar electromagnetic energies would greatly exceed the cost of current technology.

A good example of the hero worship, ascribed to Tesla by some fringe scientists, is that of Stan Deyo, author of *The Cosmic Conspiracy* ([1978] 1983). Deyo writes of several Tesla-related topics within that book, such as death rays, weather warfare, and electromagnetic-physiological warfare. Deyo writes ([1978] 1983, 44):

The genius who won the Nobel Prize in 1912; ... patented over 900 new processes in the field of energy conversion; received fourteen doctorates from universities all over the world; resonated the entire earth in 1889 with over 100,000,000 volts; broadcast electricity over twenty-five miles (without wires) to light 10,000 watts of filament globes; devised the system of alternating current power generation and transmission which lights the world today; designed a 'force field' to shield America from air attack in WW II; suggested a process for a charged-particle 'deathray' (which is now a reality); discussed electrical weather control in 1905; ... that rare genius of a man, Dr. Nikola Tesla, who had crammed several lifetimes of research into one, was to finally expire—a lonely and apparently forgotten figure Only time will reveal whether he was really 'forgotten' or whether his work was so advanced that it has required two generations of secrecy to 'safely' administer its findings....

I critically surveyed Tesla's lifetime accomplishments in the first two parts of this series; so, most of the superlative statements posted above were examined already. However, to review two significant facts—The Nobel Prize mystery was in 1915, not 1912: William Bragg Sr. and Jr. were the recipients, not Tesla. Also, I feel it necessary to point out that Tesla didn't transmit electricity over a distance of twenty-five miles, (reference Part 2, *AJNP*, August 1987), but he did subsequently write, "While I have not as yet actually effected a transmission of a considerable amount of energy, such as would be of industrial importance, to a great distance by this new method, ..." (Cheney [1981] 1983, 149). (The reader is referred to the previous parts of this series for more information.) The examples posted above serve to show that a second group of fringe believers involve Tesla. This group doesn't seem to be immediately self-serving, in that the reasons for the high adoration of Tesla don't seem to point to some financial gain or authoritative backing for some weird-tech system. More or less, these people seek to exhibit Tesla as a victim of circumstances greater than his genius could compensate for.

In the long run, it is very hard to predict when and where something that Tesla thought of, experimented with, or is attributed to, will manifest itself as some new technological marvel. Even when new things come about, in many ways, it is often a strong leap of the imagination to credit Tesla; e.g., some writers have equated Tesla's carbon-button lamp with the cyclotron atomic particle smasher. On the other hand, some of Tesla's genuine contributions have been credited only to Westinghouse or Edison, or just seem to have "appeared" in the realm of modern technology. For example, the American history textbook cited in the first article doesn't even mention Tesla. The balanced perspective of Tesla's contributions to science and technology acknowledges him beyond the boundaries given by the scientific/engineering community that Robert Anton Wilson describes; and yet, realizes the limitations, weaknesses, and actual scale of accomplishments short of the Tesla fanatics and users. Finally, this Serbian-born, naturalized American, genius, poet, and socializer among the rich and famous, lived a life with greater heights and depths than 98% of the rest of us ever could experience. Tesla's life was a life paradoxically fulfilled, yet incomplete.

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