

# Book Review: A Culture of Conspiracy

Katje Richstatter

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## A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America

Michael Barkun

*Reviewed by Katje Richstatter*

First off, let's clarify what Michael Barkun is talking about here. Despite the sweeping title, this analysis is concerned with what the author calls 'Improvisational Millennialism,' a subset of conspiracy theories that are not based on religious or secular canons, but are instead 'bricolages' culled together from disparate, unrelated, and sometimes contradictory elements into *superconspiracies*.

*A Culture of Conspiracy* builds logically, beginning with the nature of such beliefs, the common source material from which they are constructed, and the threads which connect them, including preoccupations with the Illuminati, Freemasons, Jews, Catholics, black helicopters, and UFOs. This ilk of millenarian is obsessed with an endgame in which the aforementioned 'evil forces' (in various, secret permutations) battle with 'good forces' (presumably the believers) to produce an alternate future. This future is, at worst, a 'New World Order' in which Americans lose their way of life and are enslaved by evil forces.

By focusing on individual millennial theories and theorists and the way their beliefs are formed and transmitted, Barkun sidesteps the sensationalism usually associated with popular studies of apocalyptic movements. Instead of reading like a tantalizing who's who of militias, cults, and other marginalized organizations, this is a straightforward political study with a potentially very broad readership. Given the ways in which Americans have been encouraged to fear the threat of terrorism over the past three years, Barkun's book couldn't be more helpful in diagnosing what a tremendously strong cultural chord the ideology of terrorism strikes in Americans.

Logically, one of *A Culture of Conspiracy's* most interesting chapters deals with the dissemination of apocalyptic explanations for September 11<sup>th</sup>, when masses of bewildered Americans searched the Internet for any shred of truth to make sense of the catastrophe. This chapter brings the book's usefulness into focus by giving a very concrete example of why anyone would be drawn to such claims. Obviously fear is a primary motivator for shifts in belief systems, and also in the compliance with societal changes that followed in the wake of the disaster, namely increased surveillance and decreased privacy. Conspiracy theorists are affirmed in their beliefs by such governmental reactions. But, as Barkun points out, any event re-affirms that their beliefs are always right.

*A Culture of Conspiracy* is shot through with plenty of entertaining, baffling, and sometimes frightening examples. But the conclusion of the book brings up many new revelations and is somewhat unsatisfying because of it. Within the last few pages, Barkun argues that conspiracy theories have not produced mass movements, also contending that the 'myth' of millenarians as outwardly violent is largely false. Does this admission make his examination any less valid? Is Barkun himself falling into the trap of trying to explain the inexplicable? And are these theories more than paranoid sci-

ence fiction thought up by isolated individuals who now, online, can make their way into the mainstream? Barkun hopes that it doesn't happen, that this worldview will fade away in time.

Unfortunately, *A Culture of Conspiracy* ends its otherwise unflappable account of American apocalypticism with the sinister prophecy that 'new orthodoxies can emerge out of just such ideological undergrowth. One wonders whether by making such contradictory statements, Barkun just covering his bases. Difficult to tell, but not confusing enough to otherwise learn a great deal from a book about one of the most important cultural undercurrents informing contemporary American politics.

*A Culture of Conspiracy* is available from the University of California Press.

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