



A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America

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What do UFO believers, Christian millennialists, and right-wing conspiracy theorists have in common?

According to Michael Barkun in this fascinating yet disturbing book, quite a lot. It is well known that some Americans are obsessed with conspiracies. The Kennedy assassination, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the 2001 terrorist attacks have all generated elaborate stories of hidden plots. What is far less known is the extent to which conspiracist worldviews have recently become linked in strange and unpredictable ways with other "fringe" notions such as a belief in UFOs, Nostradamus, and the Illuminati. Unraveling the extraordinary genealogies and permutations of these increasingly widespread ideas, Barkun shows how this web of urban legends has spread among subcultures on the Internet and through mass media, how a new style of conspiracy thinking has recently arisen, and how this phenomenon relates to larger changes in American culture. This book, written by a leading expert on the subject, is the most comprehensive and authoritative examination of contemporary American conspiracism to date.

Barkun discusses a range of material—Involving inner-earth caves, government black helicopters, alien abductions, secret New World Order cabals, and much more—that few realize exists in our culture. Looking closely at the manifestations of these ideas in a wide range of literature and source material from religious and political literature, to New Age and UFO publications, to popular culture phenomena such as *The X-Files*, and to websites, radio programs, and more, Barkun finds that America is in the throes of an unrivaled period of millennial activity. His book underscores the importance of understanding why this phenomenon is now spreading into more mainstream segments of American culture.

A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America Details

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Bertrand says

"You shall hear your history such as I think I have read it, not in books composed by those like you, for they are liars, but in the book of nature which never lies." Jean Jacques Rousseau, On the Inequality among Mankind, Introduction, 7

Barkun's work need to be divided between his research work and his analysis: although he set out to provide us with an overview of the subject of conspiracies at large, and an analysis of the phenomenon to be applied generically, one is bound to review the author's ambition after completing the reading:

Although the research call on many pamphlets and small prints, and duly acknowledge the central importance that the internet gained in those cultures, it also fails at assessing at least two aspects that one would have ought to find in this book: his research is largely (exclusively?) text based, and the rich oral tradition of conspiracy theories are absent to the profit of those published and propagandized. This, and the familiarity of author with right-wing and militia milieu (which he studied previously) lead him to drastically limit the scope of his investigation to far-right, ufological or religious conspiracy theories. This would be fine if he acknowledged it, but in silently ignoring a number of other routes he seems to pursue, as I will discuss below, an ideological agenda of dubious honesty.

If the research is wanting, though, the analysis and the methodology provide some highly compelling concept, most of all his "fact/fiction reversal", a idiosyncrasy of the "conspiracist" mindset in which the separation between fiction and fact is instrumentalized in order interpret facts metaphorically or fiction literally when one or the other fail to confirm the conspiracy theory. His other notions such as "stigmatized knowledge", if less original for a NRM sociologist, certainly remain credible. Yet with such a compelling start one wishes that Pr. Barkun would have taken his analysis further: a genuine narratological interpretation of the formation of conspiracy theories would have fittingly developed the "fact/fiction reversal" for example.

But where the analysis more markedly lacks rigour or honesty is in it's lack of acknowledgement of the empirical basis for conspiracy theories: although the author early on states he wishes not for his book to treat conspiracy theories as paranoid delusions, that is resulting from a medical condition, Barkun completely ignores the mirror phenomenon of actual secret societies. Of course the vision of that conspiracy theories have of "secret societies" (understand fraternal or initiatic orders etc.) is worlds apart from the reality but there has been historically, an interplay between the two phenomena, where secret societies have attempted to (over)identify themselves with the forces at play in the conspiracists' fantasies, as much as, as Barkun documents it, the conspiracists aggregated and distorted knowledge of those societies. But Barkun fail to acknowledge this two ways relationship, for the simple reason that he fails to acknowledge that there has been any such thing as secrecy in world history. Secrecy, in his interpretation, is a nebulous projection of the mind of the conspiracists attempting to fill in the gaps of a wanting, over-simplified ideology.

One could wish that a political scientists like Mr Barkun could remember the work of D. S. Donaldson on the Arcana Imperii (which nicely evidence the mutual influence of the hidden and the suspecting) or even of Leo Strauss.

Without reading too much in Barkun's book one can, on the basis of his final chapter, advance somewhat of an explanation as to the reasons of his slightly narrow reading; To him, conspiracy theories are not phenomena arising on the fringe of various worldviews, but a semi-coherent ideology, which poses, as demonstrated by various terror acts in which those ideas are quoted, a concrete threat to public security. Setting aside the controversy of such "thought-crimes" one is bound to wonder whether the author's ignoring the many leftist or benign conspiracy theories is not an attempt at presenting the phenomenon as more

coherent than it actually is, and whether the short-comings of his methodology would not have to do with the same, politically motivated, politicization of culture.

Whether conspiracy theories arise from the far-right milieu, or whether extremist ideas arise from the conspiracist milieu is certainly a question worth asking, but it is not asked in this book, or if it is the question is conveniently eluded to make space for the presentation of Barkun's own aggregate as a coherent and hostile ideology. This seems to have served him well as he has since appeared as an expert in various conspiracy theory related trials.

Henning says

Rent deskriptiv skildring av olika konspirationsteorier som florerar i USA. Barkun följer grundsatsen att konspirationsteorier i sig är marginalfenomen och uttryck för "stigmatiserad kunskap". På så sätt blir de aktörer han tar fasta på i princip uteslutande ett gäng vansinniga kufar. Analysen känns ibland ganska tunn. Internet, globalisering och misstro mot makten har gjort det enklare för galna idéer att få någon sorts fotfäste, om dock i mer utspädd och kaotiskt uppbländad form. No shit, sherlock.

För mig är den intressantaste frågan är om det konspirationsteoretiska tänkandet i vidare mening verkligen blivit marginaliserat, och hur och när det i så fall skedde. Boken publicerades 2013, tre år innan presidentvalet, och Donald Trumps "birtherism" nämns bara i en paragraf eller två. Istället faller Barkun tillbaka på en förenklad verklighetsbild där dagens mainstreamtänkande eller åtminstone det tänkande som besitter makten präglas av vetenskaplig rigör. Historiskt förblir detta så kallade *sunda förnuft* dock en anomalie.

Jeb Card says

Excellent examination of the fluidity of conspiracy thinking and politics in American society. Barkun shows how seemingly unrelated concepts, if they are considered "forbidden" can crosscut and produce bizarre combinations (antisemitism, populist right wing and New Age left wing politics, UFOs, and subterranean lizard people shouldn't have much in common, and yet ...). His study of the development of Reptilian lore was particularly useful for me, and has pushed me into making some links of my own between pop science, pulp fiction, and conspiracy theory that I had never seen before. Solidly recommended.

Brian says

All in all, a fascinating spotlight on a surreal dark corner of American culture.

They really are out there. And they are strange...very strange.

Tobias says

An interesting account of how different conspiracy theories melded into a unified subculture of conspiracy in the 1990s, in which conspiracy theorists have blended once-separate conspiracy theories (UFOs, Masons,

Jews, New World Order, etc.) into a super conspiracy, what Barkun calls "improvisational millennialism."

Patrick Bair says

Not particularly well written, the accumulation of informative is nevertheless worthwhile. I wish Barkun had spent more time discussing the psychology of those people who perceive every day conspiracies, but who don't necessarily connect them to a larger world view, so-called "closed systems of belief."

Tim says

The latest work from a leading scholar of millennial and radical religious movements. I can't imagine reading all the stuff he's had to read to put this together, but he can't identify how many people he's describing, or assess their real impact.

Simon says

The author begins from the premise that all conspiracy theories are bunk. He also defines the word conspiracy effectively as an untenable assertion. These are false premises. Yet there are conspiracies. The assassination of Julius Caesar was a conspiracy, as were many other (if not all) assassinations of political leaders. It seems the aim here is to debunk the weird and wonderful, but without a proper study of history.

Raughley Nuzzi says

This was a *great* book that gave insight into the mindset required for belief in conspiracies great and small. The history and currency of conspiratorial belief is fascinating and my only criticism of this book is that it was published in 2006. Barkun missed out on the apotheosis of conspiracy in the campaign and election of President Trump. While the book touches on 9/11, it was written in an era before the internet had properly come into its own--before pizzagate or wikileaks or the birther movement or the Deep State or Russian collusion. Point in case: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/steven-barkun-conspiracy-theories.html>...

This topic is long overdue for a new edition, but I highly recommend it to anyone interested in political current events or in fringe belief groups.

Michael T. says

You may want to skip the first chapter, as it is a little dry and academic with its jargony definitions. Once through that, though, there is some amazing information here. Especially timely in our through the looking glass era, too.

Patricia Roberts-Miller says

Excellent summary, almost an encyclopedia.

Patrick says

Fascinating examination of the overlap between various UFO and New Age literatures and communities with fascist thought. Given the state of things now, with Alex Jones having press credentials and #fakenews on the rise, it's hard not to wince whenever Barkun assures readers that these ideas are not part of the mainstream.

Bradley Kale says

So the roots of most conspiracy theories: prejudice and profitable fantasy.

Phillip says

This book added a new phrase to my idiolect, "stigmatized knowledge".

The author of this book is a sociologist who wrote a book about protestant Christian skin heads. He said that he gathered and read all of the literature he could find while researching that book. A surprise for him was that conspiracy theories, including the existence of UFOs and otherworldly aliens, were a staple of this literature. He used the material on conspiracies to write the current book.

The author says he doesn't know if UFOs or aliens are real. He doesn't care. His purpose is to describe a sociological phenomenon. His book is quite interesting. He poses the many ways that people become outsiders. When a person becomes an outsider he or she no longer wants to evaluate events using the disciplines of thought that are recognized by mainstream society. Alternative theories and approaches to reasoning become desirable simply because they are stigmatized knowledge. By the end of the book the author shows how varying conspiracy theories feed each other to convince believers of a host of conspiracies that initially have nothing to do with one another.

Eric says

I picked this up to prepare and research for a class I'm teaching this fall focusing on the rhetoric of conspiracy theories. A fascinating (as well as frightening and frustrating) read. His terms and categories make it easier to understand and digest the nebulous and contradictory narratives given in these circles. I was a little disappointed in the 9/11 chapter as it felt a little more general and summary of their responses. Maybe it's just indicative of the (relatively, at least when this was written) recent nature of the attacks.

His final chapter delves into the possible consequences of the permeability of these fringe ideas and mainstream culture and his caution certainly seems merited. I'm reminded of former Colorado gubernatorial candidate Dan Mayes' assertion that an attempt to introduce a bike sharing program in Denver was part of a UN takeover plan. That being one of the tamer examples I can think of. Certainly worth a look for anyone hoping to get a general look at the evolution of conspiracy theories in the US.
