

**JACK Z. BRATICH (2008) CONSPIRACY PANICS:
POLITICAL RATIONALITY AND POPULAR
CULTURE. ALBANY: SUNY PRESS.
ISBN 978-0-7914-7333-7.**

Shayne Pepper

In his new book, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, Jack Z. Bratich does not just ask what a conspiracy theory is, but rather asks under what conditions something comes to be called a conspiracy theory. This book is a valuable contribution to the increasing literature that takes up Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality. Like other works that examine popular culture through the lens of neoliberalism and governmentality, Bratich considers conspiracy panics to be a tool of governing at a distance. In short, he uses Foucault's method of analyzing liberal governmentality in order to understand how conspiracy panics are problematized within a form of governing at a distance that relies on a rational citizenry and a certain level of individual freedom. Bratich's project looks beyond the kind of symptomatic readings of conspiracy theories that would normally account for why a given individual or population may become susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. Instead, he attempts to understand what the political rationality that necessarily *calls* such discourse a conspiracy theory is.

Much of the book is devoted to mapping this political rationality (what Bratich calls a 'will-to-moderation'), which aims to marginalize certain discourse by calling it a conspiracy theory. It is the desire to expunge this irrational conspiratorial discourse that manifests itself as a *conspiracy panic*. Bratich writes,

My argument is that 'conspiracy theory' functions as an intolerable line and an antagonism. While occasionally linked to particular groups (militias, African Americans, political extremists) the panic here is over a particular *form of thought* (and its potential links to action). The

scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent (11).

Bratich also uses conspiracy theories as way of thinking about our understanding of major post-Cold War social and political issues. In summary, his book examines how conspiracy theory affects and gets articulated by 'the rise of new technologies; the social function of journalism; U.S. race relations; the parameters of dissent; globalization, biowarfare, and biomedicine; and the shifting position within the Left' (6). With equal levels of intellectual distance and engaged passion, Bratich moves through these topics over the course of his book.

In the first chapter, Bratich outlines a history of those who have problematized conspiracy theories, figures such as Harold Lasswell, Richard Hofstadter, and Seymour Lipset, who lay out a psychological and sociological argument for why paranoia must be distinguished and divided from the mainstream – often linking these to political extremism and dissent. Bratich's project is to demonstrate how these conspiracy panics can have direct effects on the way in which the state governs or the way in which news media determine the boundaries of fact, truth, and proper investigational reporting. Unlike professionalized investigative journalism, civic journalism (when it turned into conspiracy theory) became excessive critique – beyond the pale of political rationality and a threat to neoliberal governance. For these authors, conspiracy theorists don't see error in governing that needs to be corrected through informed debate and political participation; instead they see evil intention that is attempting to foreclose such informed citizen activism and therefore must be eradicated.

After submitting the theoretical foundation of his work, Bratich devotes the second chapter to the way in which professional journalism has been an arena in which conspiracy theories are contested and negotiated. He takes as his starting points Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*, and the panic surrounding the dangers of militias after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. He notes that while conspiracy theories circulating around, and enflamed by, Stone's film could be discounted (or even disregarded), the conspiracy theories that informed the thoughts of militias and individuals like Timothy McVeigh posed far more serious threats since they could have (and indeed have) escalated to violence. These two examples may seem

distant to us only ten to fifteen years later, but Bratich brings them into relief in such a way that they work quite well to point out the larger trajectory that he picks up on in the second half of the book.

Bratich's third chapter continues the examination into journalism, focusing on Gary Webb's story in the *San Jose Mercury News* on the CIA's alleged involvement with the crack epidemic in Southern California. In this chapter, Bratich writes that 'Webb's story, as an object of concern, is a portal into the public anxieties over the popular emergence of the Internet. In this case, professional journalism's conspiracy panic manages cultural anxieties over the disruptive character of new technologies' (81). In this case mainstream journalism distances itself from the Internet, positioning the latter as a breeding ground for unreliable conspiracy theorizing. This act of problematizing the Internet makes the theories untrustworthy not because of their information but rather *because* they are on the Internet. The connection here is succinctly made to the neoliberal political rationality of governing at a distance. He writes that because Webb's story did not meet the 'protocols of truthtelling' that professional journalism adheres to, there was not even a *need* for the CIA or anyone in government to deny those claims or even prevent the story from being published (93). As Bratich mentions in his introduction, this conspiracy theory does not even have the liberty to be considered untrue. It is rendered disqualified, irrational, and quite simply paranoid – despite whatever truths the story may have uncovered about the CIA's connections to drug trafficking.

In this chapter, Bratich also makes the appropriate connection to more recent phenomena of citizen journalism (bloggers, Indymedia, and other iterations of Web2.0 journalism), and asks, 'What is their cultural authority?' and 'What are their limits, and when are they considered extremist and out of bounds?' (95). Rather than ask questions about reliability and bias, Bratich is more concerned with the 'will-to-moderation' that 'still pervades the discourse about what counts as legitimate knowledge within the market place of ideas, and a particular rationality [that] sets limits on popular participation in political knowledge production' (95). As our forms of news media continue to change, Bratich tries to understand what questions, viewpoints, and dissent will even be allowed to be tested in the court of legitimacy. What lines of inquiry will be allowed to question government and which are rendered illegitimate (or worse, dangerous) and will close off progressive reform before it can even get off the ground?

In the fourth chapter, Bratich examines conspiracies surrounding the emergence and spread of AIDS. He asks what the productive potential of these conspiracy theories might be. He argues that while they are 'typically positioned as a distraction from real research and activism... many of the conspiracy accounts themselves call for research and activism, hence dismissing them assumes that we know exactly what kind of knowledge, education, and activism is proper' (98). In this chapter and the next, Bratich begins the line of questioning that informs the second half of the book. He asks, 'How does the Left contribute to political rationality? How have conspiracy theories impacted progressive movements? What is the Left's role in conspiracy panics, and in liberal governance around fusion of thought and action?' (98). For example, he notes that while many conspiracy theories are 'problematized as Left oriented', Leftists such as Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, and Mark Crispin Miller are several in the 'oppositional milieu' who 'explicitly disavow any association with them' (99).

Utilizing a framework originally articulated by John Fiske, Bratich argues that conspiracy theories may contain counterknowledge that could compliment the Left's existing political concerns and even become 'a catalyst for new forms of analysis and activism' (119). Of course, the chapter does not simply cherry pick from AIDS conspiracy theories in order to find the bits that are useful to the Left's political project. What Bratich does is examine how and why sociocultural approaches have been employed to problematize AIDS conspiracy theories. These sociocultural approaches find reasons why, for example, African-Americans would be inclined to subscribe to conspiracy theories about AIDS being a tool of genocidal biowarfare against them. Bratich takes his analysis a step further, noting that conspiracy theories are an 'opportunity to recognize that origin stories and alternative accounts matter, opportunity to take them seriously as articulatory projects rather than right-wing distractions or deadly diversions' (120).

These chapters (five and six) bring the book to what seems to be the crux of Bratich's political project: thinking through the shifting of the Left after the Cold War, specifically through the Clinton and Bush administrations, in order to trace the ways in which dissent has often been marginalized, co-opted, or negated outright through its alignment with conspiracy theories. Bratich traces the Left's critique of militias and their conspiracy theories during the Clinton administration and the Left's distancing itself from the 9/11 Truth

Movement during the Bush administration. In both instances, despite the lines of inquiry and political critiques that may be shared by these conspiracies and the broader goals of the Left, the way in which these conspiracy panics are problematized limits the productive lines of questioning, dissent, and political efficacy of all groups involved.

Bratich nicely makes the connections between these two conspiracy panics in order to trace the limits (self-imposed or otherwise) on dissent among the Left. He writes,

The post-cold war era of conspiracy panics has been particularly convoluted for the Left. The trajectory of conspiracy panics maps nicely onto the recent history of the Left's fraught relationship to (neo)liberal regimes of governance. Little attention has been paid to this trajectory... Left criticisms of Bush wrongdoing often draw a direct line from Bush I to Bush II, as though the reign of the latter has produced amnesia about the Clinton years (or worse yet, a nostalgia for them). But this 'great leap over (Clinton)' ignores the complexity of the Left's own composition as well as the precursors to the current predicament (155).

Bratich sees a 'will-to-moderation permeating political culture' as sections of the Left ignored or kept quiet about conspiracy theory grumblings concerned with Waco, Ruby Ridge, AIDS, and CIA/crack connections in order to '[shore] up consent to the beleaguered regime' [the Clinton administration] (156). And while after an initial period of silence and muffled critique of the Bush administration after 9/11 the Left became quite vocal about the mismanaged Iraq policy, Bratich claims this dissent was careful to disassociate itself from the conspiratorial thinking of the 9/11 Truth Movement. He writes that the 'Clinton-era clamoring for a rational-based politics didn't just render the political space vulnerable to future machinations of the Right. It contributed to a self-divisive tendency, one that in turning dissent against dissent made the Left reactive and weakened its ability to understand and expand via new popular movements' (164). Critique that was too radical and moved away from the 'will-to-moderation' during the Clinton era was shut down and vilified, fracturing the Left and weakening their possibility for a unified critique when it was arguably needed far more during the Bush administration.

Throughout the book, Bratich emphasizes the key question about conspiracy research when he writes, '[The] question does not entail affirming the veracity of any of the narratives; rather, it interrogates the regimes of truth and reason that compose political life and examines the conditions under which alternative narratives are disqualified' (159). Bratich's research differs from sociocultural approaches in that it does not look for the causes of conspiracy theories or what might make someone believe in a conspiracy, but rather what causes a discourse to be called a conspiracy. Bratich's own contribution to the growing literature on governmentality reminds us that 'popular culture is not just a site for the extension of governing techniques; it is a terrain on which a populace is formed' (167). For Bratich, this populace can enact the struggle over what critique is deemed worthy of analysis and might open up lines of inquiry – a web of research by the multitude where conspiracy theories are mined for the counterknowledges they produce.