

# Review of 'The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization'

Thomas Robbins

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*The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization.* Edited by Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Loow. Altamira, 2002. 351 pages. \$26.95 paper.

This is a truly fascinating volume. It may not entirely live up to its theoretical potential but it will greatly reward the scholarly reader with a background or interest in new religious movements, millenarian groups, or political extremism.

The papers included in this volume were originally presented at Stockholm University in 1997 at a conference on “Rejected and Suppressed Knowledge: The Racist Right and the Cultic Milieu.” The contributors drew upon a seminal paper published in 1972 by sociologist Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” which is reprinted in this volume. Campbell’s article sought to revise the study of sectarianism by, as Mattias Gardell puts it, shifting the “focus from the individual organizations that emerged and declined, transformed and mutated to the milieu in which they operated” (p. 184). The cultic milieu, note the editors, is a kind of oppositional counterculture, “a zone in which proscribed and/or forbidden knowledge is the coin of the realm, a place in which ideas, theories and speculations are to be found, exchanged, modified, and eventually adopted or rejected by adherents of countless, primarily ephemeral groups whose leaders come and go and whose membership constitutes a permanent class of seekers whose adherence to any particular leader or organization tends to be fleeting at best” (p. 3). Within the milieu symbolic meanings are continually combined, recombined and amalgamated through processes of syncretism and, to use Bron Taylor’s apt term, *bricolage*. Groups which share certain meanings may be highly antithetical in other respects, and fundamentally antagonistic groups may converge on key themes, e.g., right-wing racist movements share environmental and animal rights concerns with progressive movements.

All the contributions are interesting and useful but they vary in the degree to which they articulate a provocative theoretical statement. In my view the most stimulating piece is by Mattias Gardell, “Black and White United in Fight?” which explores the “series of overt and covert contacts [that] link together America’s white and black racialist organizations” (p. 152). These developments are analyzed in terms of a theoretical framework that emphasizes race as “an integral foundation of Americanism.” Both white and black racialism have interacted with the traditional creed of the United States as “an instrument of God’s work in the world” and with the received mystiques of the Chosen People journeying to the Promised Land. Both white and black racialism celebrate a timeless, corporate, racial community opposed to globalist and multicultural trends. Similar separatist goals, shared antagonism toward Jews, and the grudging respect on the part of white extremists for the organizing power of the Nation of Islam are creating the basis for an enhanced mutual sympathy between white and black racial separatists.

Bron Taylor contributes a provocative paper, “Diggers, Wolves, Ents, Elves and Expanding Universes.” Taylor explores the interaction of radical environmentalism with other partly convergent subcultures such as Neopaganism, New Age, American Indian Movement, Animal Rights, and even white separatism within the American opposi-

tional cultic milieu of “antiglobalization resistance.” There is a special focus on the rise of “green anarchism” and the recent debates within the milieu over the use of violence. Taylor sees hardly any mutual solidarity and interaction between racialist and environmentalist movements, notwithstanding some partial thematic convergence. However, in “The Idea of Purity: Swedish Racist Counterculture, Animal Rights and Environmental Protection,” co-editor Helene Loow sees a close and harmonious relationship developing between racist-anti-Semitic themes and ecological-animal rights themes cohabiting within a Swedish movement that seeks to purify the environment. The idea of *purity* interrelates environmentalism and racialism.

Students of new religious movements may be particularly interested in J. Gordon Melton’s essay, “The Modern Anti-Cult Movement in Historical Perspective.” Melton’s chapter is informative and insightful and covers European as well as American developments, but it is marred by what may turn out to be an unwarranted optimism concerning the likelihood that “the present anti-cult sentiment will diminish as the weaknesses of the brainwashing theories are brought to the forefront” (p. 283). Alternatively, horrendous “cult violence” by Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven’s Gate, and others, coupled with terrorist traumas may make “mind control” notions appear more superficially plausible. Melton may also miss a trick in not pointing out the obvious negative implications of cultic milieu theory for the brainwashing model. The latter envisions strong organizations regimenting and transforming passive participants; however, cultic milieus are said to be filled with weak and/or ephemeral organizations with weak group boundaries. Research by Jeffrey Kaplan and others has confirmed this image with regard to right-wing extremists: a subculture of volatile renegades exists within which cantankerous and difficult-to-regiment individuals move in and out of various unstable organizations.

Melton’s essay is one of two chapters dealing with “watchdogs” that keep extremist groups under surveillance and mobilize opposition to them. Laird Wilcox asks “Who Watches the Watchdog?” He argues that professional watchdogs are not only professionally alarmist and often ruthless and manipulative in their tactics, but often have their own extremist associations, e.g., anti-fascist and anti-racist activists often have leftist connections.

The additional papers are all fascinating. They include studies of Neoshamanism and psychic phenomena in Hungary (Laszlo Kurti), the Gothic milieu (Massimo Introvigne) and the influence of communal Mormon and fringe Mormon groups in the American right-wing cultic milieu (Timothy Miller). Frederick Simonelli, the definitive biographer of American Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell, discusses the development of Rockwell’s international movement, the World Union of National Socialists. Finally, co-editor Jeffrey Kaplan discusses more recent Neo-Nazi developments and the interaction of contemporary National Socialism with other elements in the cultic milieu, such as Satanism, Neopaganism, radical environmentalism, and the growing apocalyptic mystique of Charles Manson.

The volume could have benefited from a concluding chapter, which might have drawn together the implications of all the various chapters for the further development, extrapolation, and revision of Colin Campbell's original formulation. The editors' introduction is useful but rather short. Campbell's piece was written three decades ago and cannot fully integrate the volume. Finally, Campbell and some of the other authors see cultic milieu theory as an alternative to the traditional study of sectarianism. No one seems to have picked up on the work of the late Roy Wallis, a British sociologist who strove to synthesize cultic milieu theory and the received conception of the sect.

The papers in this volume were written a half-decade ago. Some of them do not appear to have been subsequently revised and updated, e.g., some works, which have since been published, are cited as forthcoming. There is occasional carelessness as when Melton takes note of an important insight of James Beckford but does not provide a citation. But this collection is theoretically significant and will hopefully (though probably not) find a wide readership that might even include college courses in American Studies.

*Thomas Robbins, Rochester, Minnesota*

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