

“This Is Gonna Sound Like a Conspiracy Thing” An Ethnographic Perspective on Tea Party Theories of Power



Sierra Bell

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Anthropology Lunchtime Lecture

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11:50-1:10

Downey House Lounge

Conspiracy theories have become increasingly prominent in American public discourse, a trend linked to the rise of rightwing populism. While a cause for concern, this also raises the uncomfortable question of whether conspiracy theories offer valid critiques of real systems of power. In this talk, Sierra Bell draws on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork among grassroots Tea Party activists to argue that her interlocutors' conspiracy theories about the state and the economy sometimes constituted insightful and important critiques of neoliberal power and to reflect on the promises and perils of theorizing power in this way. Professor Bell's research explores the cultural dimensions of the Tea Party's "limited government" political economic principles, which are oriented to what she calls *apocalyptic politics*, a form of critique that implicitly longs for national destruction and redemption.