September 11, 2001 and its Aftermath: 
Apocalypse and Empire*

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Abstract

The geopolitical processes of conflict and violence heralded by the attacks of September 11, 2001, have by now rippled into a broader set of conflicts between the U.S. as superpower and a complex and uneven coalition of Islamic and Arab movements. Despite the variety of theories of social movements and of nationalism (usually developed in the study of Western cases and conflicts internal to state boundaries), the present historical moment of conflict remains woefully undertheorized. It is therefore useful to develop a model of religio-political conflict, and to see how far such a model can be applied to contemporary events, and with what results. In this paper, I develop a phenomenological account of social temporality and employ it as a sociological calculus to parse contemporary history in relation to theories of empire. This analysis promotes the analytically distinctive point that the United States and the Islamist coalition structure their active orientations toward struggles in relation to different framings of social time. Specifically the character of the conflict can be interpreted in relation to the degree to which one or both parties to the conflict at various junctures operate within apocalyptic or other temporal frames, e.g., bureaucratic time, and other temporal frames. These considerations yield implications for understanding the conflict in relation to theories of modernity and its structure of empire.