

# Conspiracy Theories and the Social Sciences

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## 1 Course Description

Encounters with conspiracy theory, in the position of social science's doppelganger, critic, imitator and gadfly, provide an excellent opportunity to reconsider the central concepts and practices underlying social scientific investigation. To this end, this course combines readings from the empirical social scientific literature on conspiracy theories with readings dealing with philosophical and conceptual questions of interest to social scientists seeking to understand those who believe them. What kinds of claims count as conspiracy theories? Are conspiracy theories, as a category, epistemically deficient or problematic in some other way? How should social scientists deal with the fact that some conspiracy theories seem true or plausible, while others seem patently ridiculous? We will also give conspiracy theorists a chance to "talk back," reading diverse texts authored by conspiracy theorists themselves, ranging from the satirical to the deadly serious. How can we take conspiracy theorists seriously without overstating the coherence of many of their arguments? And, how can we best respond to the effects of genuinely harmful or prejudicial conspiracy theories in a way that does not uncritically affirm the authority of expertise or close off the possibility of external critique?

It is recommended, but not required, that students enrolling in this class have taken one or more courses in the Social Sciences Core.

### 1.1 Texts

All readings, including primary source selections, will be available online through Canvas.

### 1.2 Office Hours

I will hold office hours via Zoom by appointment. Please email me or ask me in class if you would like to set up a time to meet.

### 1.3 Participation

In-class participation is the most important contribution you can make to your final grade. Students are expected to make substantial contributions during class, and everyone should come to each class with at least one point or question. In order to facilitate participation, assigned readings are relatively short. To participate effectively, you will need to have fully read the assigned pages at least once, and you will benefit from repeated readings. That said, engagement is far more important than mastery. While not evaluated separately, participation requires attendance. If you are concerned about speaking in class, please reach out to me at the beginning of the course. **Participation is 25% of your grade.**

## 2 Assignments

### 2.1 Primary Source Texts

In addition to weekly assigned readings consisting of social scientific writings on conspiracy theories, students are also responsible for reading one text by a conspiracy theorist author, to be selected from the included list. Primary source texts will be selected during our first class session. In addition to reading their primary source text, students should also familiarize themselves with the text's historical context. The primary source text is intended to give students a source of examples when dealing with social scientific texts.

## 2.2 Big Questions & Presentations

For each week of assigned readings, I have listed a few Big Questions. These are major questions asked and answered by social scientists in the study of conspiracy theories. Students will choose two sessions to present during the quarter. Presentations take place at the beginning of class. Students' presentations should briefly explain how each assigned reading answers that week's Big Questions, engaging both with the author's theory and with their methodological approach. How does this author answer this week's Big Question? Do you agree or disagree with their answer? Why? In addition, presenters should draw on their assigned primary source text as a case study. What, if anything, do the readings help us understand about the primary source text? Does the primary source text pose a challenge for the assigned readings? **Presentations are 25% of your grade.**

## 2.3 Long Paper

Students are responsible for writing and revising a long paper of no more than 2500 words. Broadly, papers should draw on two or more texts from the Primary Sources list and two or more texts from the assigned readings. Students must meet with me during Week 5 to discuss paper topics, taking the Big Questions as a starting point. I will circulate a sign-up sheet during class. Students will complete a first draft and a revised draft of the paper. First drafts are due Week 9. Students will then receive substantial feedback and must submit their revised papers during the finals period. **The first draft is 20% of your grade, the final draft is 30%.**

# 3 Reading Schedule

### Week 1: Encounters with conspiracy theorists

What is it like to be a conspiracy theorist? Are we all conspiracy theorists? Why study conspiracy theories?

- Session 1a
  - Introduction, no required reading
- Session 1b
  - Kathleen Stewart, "Conspiracy Theory's Worlds," in *Paranoia Within Reason* (1999)
  - Lisa Wedeen and Joseph Masco, Introduction to *Conspiracy/Theory* (2024)
  - Robin Ramsay, "Traditions in Euro-American Conspiracy Theories," in *Politics and Paranoia* (1998)

### Week 2: Style and subculture

What does it mean to describe conspiracy theory in terms of style? Is there really such a thing as a conspiracy theorist style? Why or why not? If so, what are its characteristics?

- Session 2a
  - Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964)
  - Michael Barkun, "Millennialism, Conspiracy and Stigmatized Knowledge," in *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003)
- Session 2b
  - Timothy Melley, "The Culture of Paranoia," in *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000)
  - Michael Rogin, "American Political Demonology: a retrospective," in *Derangement and Liberalism* (1987)

### Week 3: History of conspiracy theory

What is the relationship between historical and present-day conspiracy theories? In what ways are present and historical theories different?

- Session 3a
  - Bernard Bailyn, “The Logic of Rebellion” and “A Note on Conspiracy,” in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967)
  - Katharina Thalmann, “Reflecting Stigmatization: The Kennedy assassination and conspiracy theories in the 1960s,” in *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s* (2019)
- Session 3b
  - Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, “Conspiracy Without The Theory,” “Knowledge” and “Who Owns Reality?” in *A Lot Of People Are Saying* (2019)

### Week 4: Who believes?

Who believes in conspiracy theories? Could some people have a greater propensity to believe in conspiracy theories? Why or why not? How could we find out?

- Session 4a
  - Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood, “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2014)
  - Joseph Uscinski, Casey Klofstad and Matthew Atkinson, “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions,” *Political Research Quarterly* (2016)
- Session 4b
  - Enders et. al., “Do Conspiracy Beliefs Form a Belief System? Examining the Structure and Organization of Conspiracy Beliefs,” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (2021)
  - Stephanie Ternullo, “I’m Not Sure What To Believe: Media Distrust and Opinion Formation during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *American Political Science Review* (2022)

### Week 5: Truth and misinformation

Is there a difference between conspiracy theories and other kinds of explanations? How? Is there something wrong with conspiracy theories? Would better or more information help mitigate harmful beliefs?

- Session 5a
  - Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future* (1968)
  - Brian Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* (1999)
- Session 5b
  - Pete Mandik, “Shit Happens,” *Episteme* (2007)
  - Lisa Wedeen, “On Uncertainty: Fake News, Post- truth, and the Question of Judgment,” in *Authoritarian Apprehensions* (2019)

### Week 6: Solving the problem of conspiracy theory?

Is it possible to discourage or eliminate belief in conspiracy theories? Would this be desirable? Why or why not?

- Session 6a

- Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2009)
- Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, “Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science,” *Public Understanding of Science* (2014)
- Session 6b
  - Ben Epstein, “Why It Is So Difficult to Regulate Disinformation Online,” in *The Disinformation Age* (2020)
  - David Coady, “Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2003)

### **Week 7: Definitions, complications**

What is a conspiracy theory, anyway? How do we know when something counts as one? What is the role of political authority in determining what counts?

- Session 7a
  - Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders, “What is a Conspiracy Theory and Why Does It Matter?,” *Critical Review* (2022)
  - M. R. X. Dentith, “Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence,” *Synthese* (2019)
- Session 7b
  - Keith Raymond Harris, “Some Problems With Particularism,” *Synthese* (2019)
  - Juha Räikkä, “On Political Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2009)

### **Week 8: Contemporary issues – polarization, populism**

Do conspiracy theories play a unique role in contemporary politics, as compared to earlier periods? If so, what factors could contribute to the increasing spread and salience of conspiracy theories?

- Session 8a
  - Sophia Rosenfeld, “The Populist Reaction,” in *Democracy and Truth* (2018)
  - Jeffrey Friedman, “Technocratic Naivete,” in *Power Without Knowledge* (2019)
- Session 8b
  - Yochai Benkler, “A Political Economy of the Origins of Asymmetric Propaganda in American Media,” in *The Disinformation Age* (2020)
  - Ronald Beiner, “The Plague of Bannionism,” *Critical Review* (2019)

### **Week 9: Contemporary issues – internet, algorithm, technology**

Is there something about online social forms which encourage conspiratorial forms of reasoning, or that render conspiracy theories particularly plausible? Are new information and communication technologies contributing to wider public knowledge of conspiracy theories?

- Session 9a
  - Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips, “Right-Wing YouTube: A Supply and Demand Perspective,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* (2020)
  - Andrew Guess and Kevin Munger, “Digital Literacy and Online Political Behavior,” *Political Science Research and Methods* (2022)
- Session 9b

- Brian Friedberg and Joan Donovan, “On The Internet, Nobody Knows You’re A Bot,” Journal of Design and Science (2019)
- Winston Berg, “Knowing (With) The Enemy”

## 4 Primary Sources

\* indicates film

*Proofs of a Conspiracy*, John Robison (1797)

Alleges an Illuminati conspiracy, later appropriated by the John Birch Society as an early example of conspiracy theory.

*The Empire of "The City,"* E.C. Knuth (1944)

Alleges a conspiracy by British imperial intelligence & financial interests.

*The Secret Destiny of America*, Manly P. Hall (1944)

Alleges that the Founding Fathers were esoterically motivated.

*The Truth About Pearl Harbor*, John T. Flynn (1946)

Argues that U.S. officials intentionally provoked the Pearl Harbor attacks to justify entry into the war.

*Pawns in the Game*, William Guy Carr (1956)

Alleges an "Internationalist" alliance between communists and American capitalists to undermine democracy.

*The Politician*, Robert Welch (1956)

Argues that Eisenhower was a "conscious, dedicated agent of the Communist Conspiracy."

*Report from Iron Mountain* (1967)

Satiric hoax presented as the report of a government panel. Later theorists refused to believe the purported author's claim that the document was a hoax.

*Whitewash*, Harold Weisberg (1966)

One of the earliest books critical of the Warren Report.

*The Naked Capitalist*, W. Cleon Skousen (1970)

Alleges that the global super-rich secretly orchestrate conflict between capitalists and socialists for their own benefit.

*None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, Gary Allen (1972)

Summarizes the John Birch Society's official position on the "communist conspiracy" during the 1970s.

*The Secret Team*, Fletcher Prouty (1973)

Influential account of the Kennedy assassination which attributes responsibility to the CIA.

*A Skeleton Key to the Gemstone File*, Stephanie Caruana (1975)

Described as "the original mega-conspiracy," focusing on a supposed plot against Howard Hughes that intersects with the Kennedy assassination.

*The Yankee and Cowboy War*, Carl Oglesby (1976)

Kennedy theory by a former president of Students for a Democratic Society.

*We Never Went to the Moon*, Bill Kaysing (1976)

One of the earliest proponents of the claim that the Apollo landings were faked by NASA.

*The Case of Walter Lippman*, Lyndon LaRouche (1977)

Described by its author as a "Presidential Strategy" in support of his run for office, in fact the book details LaRouche's anti-Rockefeller conspiracy theory.

*Extra-Terrestrials Among Us*, George Andrews (1986)

Claims that aliens have influenced political events since World War II.

*Behold, a Pale Horse*, William Cooper (1991)

Cooper claims to be a government whistle-blower, combines elements of JFK, UFO and FEMA theories.

*The New World Order*, Pat Robertson (1991)

A later take on the familiar "insiders," Illuminati and Council on Foreign Relations theories.

*Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, Peter Dale Scott (1993)

The origin of the term “deep state” as it appears in American politics.

*America Under Siege* (1994)\*

Film by a militia movement lawyer explaining the FEMA camp conspiracy theory.

*The Creature from Jekyll Island*, G. Edward Griffin (1994)

Highly influential conspiracy theory about the Federal Reserve.

*Black Helicopters Over America*, Jim Keith (1994)

Another take on popular 90's militia conspiracy themes – FEMA, black helicopters, and the New World Order.

*Title 4 Flag Says You're Schwag*, J. M. Sovereign Godsent (2007)

A handbook for those in the “sovereign citizen” movement, involves a complicated legal conspiracy theory.

*Loose Change* (2005) & *Zeitgeist* (2007)\*

Famous low-budget documentaries arguing that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by members of the U.S. government.