

Conspiracy Theory in History And Society

This course tackles a vital semantic problem: what are we actually talking about when we talk about Conspiracy Theory? It goes on to elaborate a concept of Conspiracy Theory as an intellectual virus that was born in Europe in the 14th century with two tropes: one having to do with Jewish moneylenders and so-called “blood libel”; the other concerning the Knights Templars and their fate. Those two templates of Conspiracy Theories have had a continuous existence since then, evolving through narratives about Freemasons, Illuminati, and the Elders of Zion, to the present day phenomena of Q-Anon and the supposed menace of a “Deep State.”

Conspiracy Theory has flared in some historical environments and receded to a fringe phenomenon in others. We plumb the implications of this fact by examining what was happening in eras when Conspiracy Theory was flourishing most vigorously, and what was happening to Conspiracy Theory in those eras. This goes to illuminating what the phenomenon is, what spawns it, and why and how it propagates.

The historical contexts spotlighted here include:

1. Europe in the period following the Crusades: this was the ancestral swamp in which was born the Conspiracy Theory stalking the Western World today.
2. Europe in the period leading up to the French Revolution and its aftermath: in this period Conspiracy Theory was elaborated into an pseudo-academic “body of thought”.
3. The early 20th century, when the imperialist system was breaking down: Conspiracy Theory now took state power, resulting in two horrific global wars.
4. America during the Cold War, when a peculiarly American strain of Conspiracy Theory began to sink roots and grow. We’ll look at narratives preached by the John Birch society and its ilk; at the Prophecy movement and its heirs; at the rise of anti-science, and the emergence of right-wing “patriot” militias.
5. The era since 9/11, aka “The Digital Era”, aka “Today”. We’ll explore how new technology such as the Internet, smart phones, social media, and virtual reality have spawned invisible networks with political power, have eroded the concept of facts, and have put science on the run.

In the end we come to understand Conspiracy Theory as something like an opportunistic infection, which comes out of the cracks and spreads through a social world when conditions favor it. These conditions obtain when:

- money is moving to a higher level of abstraction;
- old narratives are losing their power to explain ongoing events;
- the social paradigm of a whole society—in this case the planet—is shifting.

Social paradigm does not refer to the human story unfolding at any moment; it refers to the stage on which that story is unfolding. It is a network of institutions and understandings that frame the events of history and give them their meaning. This goes beyond any particular events that may be happening. When the social paradigm is shifting, *all* the meanings are in the process of changing. The proliferation of Conspiracy Theory today suggests that a global paradigm shift is indeed underway. We document this proposition by going through a number of areas where assumptions

deeply embedded in human culture are under challenge—with respect to the environment, the meaning of family, the significance of children, the nature of gender, the rules governing sexuality, our relationship to technology, and the like.