Conspiracy Theory in History and Society

Today more than ever, the term “conspiracy theory” pervades political conversations. But what exactly do we mean by that term? How do theories about possible conspiracies differ from Conspiracy Theory. This course identifies Conspiracy Theory as a phenomenon, follows its development through four distinct historical eras, from the Crusades to right now, and shows how particular Conspiracy Theories reflect the history of their times. In the process, we explore the social and psychological roots of this idea system, the sources of its power, and the underlying mythic structure that all Conspiracy Theories have in Common.

Afghan American author Tamim Ansary writes about history and culture and what happens when civilizations overlap. His latest book, The Invention of Yesterday, is a history of the world that looks at human history as the story of various world historical narratives interacting and intertwining around the planet. Conspiracy Theory is one such narrative.

Session 1: Defining “Conspiracy Theory”: The Problem

Classic definitions (and why they’re inadequate)
Richard Hofstadter
Daniel Pipes
David Aarenovitch

Actual conspiracies of history
Julius Caesar assassination plot
Hunt Brothers’ attempt to corner the silver market
The Tuskegee experiments
The Gulf of Tonkin incident
The Watergate plot
The Iran-Contra Affair

Improbable (but not utterly impossible) conspiracies
USS Maine
Pearl Harbor
Kennedy assassination
Benazir Bhutto assassination
9/11

Absurd Conspiracy Theories (that nonetheless have followings)
Moon Landing faked
Area 51
New World Headquarters under Stapleton Airport
Shape-shifting reptilian alien overlords

Session 2: Conspiracy Theory in the Aftermath of the Crusades

• Conspiracy Theory is born.
The story of the Knights Templar
English Kings and the Jews of England:

• The Historical Context:
The Crusades and after
Plague and 100-Years War.
Christendom: a narrative under siege
Banking and the abstraction of money.
Session 3: In the aftermath of the Enlightenment: 1600-1900

- Conspiracy Theory comes of age.
  The Illuminati
  From Templars to Masons
  “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.
- The Historical context
  Bourgeoisie supplanting landed aristocracy and clergy
  Science challenging scripture
  French & American Revolutions
  Ideology supersedes kinship as mechanism of solidarity

Session 4: World War and Conspiracy Theory: the 20th Century

- Conspiracy Theory goes mainstream
  Nazism: Anti-semitism as weapon
  America: “The International Jewish-Communist Conspiracy”
  Posse Comitatus and “Redemption Movement.”
  New World Order/Black Helicopters
  Trilateral-Commission/Bilderburg Group.
  New Age Conspiracy Theory: Anti-Fluoride movement
- The historical context
  Nation-state power matures
  Cold War & the Nuclear Threat.
  Industrialization, automation, and urbanization.
  Mass culture & marketing.
  Traditional family patterns under siege
  Ever-growing abstraction of money: “derivatives” as money.

Session 5: In the Digital Age: post-2001

- Conspiracy Theory Metastasizes
  9/11-Truthers.
  From New World Order to Deep State.
  From anti-fluoridation to anti-vaccine.
  Alex Jones and Info-Wars.
  Alt-Right Conspiracy Theory as a genre
- The historical context.
  Computers and cell phones.
  Social media: Reddit, Facebook, etc
  Privatization of public news
  Invisible communities of thought: the social bubble phenomenon
  Technology, virtual reality, “fake news”. “alternative facts”

Session 6: Conspiracy Theory Defined.

- Psychological roots of Conspiracy Theory
  Narrative
  Confirmation bias
  Paranoia as a genetic survival mechanism
  What Conspiracy Theory provides to Conspiracy Theorizers
- Sociology of Conspiracy Theory
  Capitalism and the abstraction of money
Institutions and their erosion
Paradigmatic social change and communal anxiety
Communal paranoia as an instrument of social solidarity

- **Politics of Conspiracy Theory**
  As tool used by elites to gain or maintain power
  Reichstaag Fire and the rise of Hitler
  Soviet show-trials and Stalin’s consolidation of power

- **Toward a definition of Conspiracy Theory**
  The underlying structure of Conspiracy Theory
  The underlying mechanisms of Conspiracy Theory
  Conspiracy Theory as a belief system