

The Socio-Political Dynamics of Conspiracy Theories

*“Everything is some kind of a plot, man”- Thomas Pynchon,
Gravity’s Rainbow*

Winter 2026

Two credit BA course, Department of Undergraduate Studies

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Office Hours: Wednesday 2-4 p.m., Friday 2-4 p.m (Other times are also possible with prior communication).

Background and Course Description

The course offers students the opportunity to explore and engage with conspiracy theories from a social and political perspective. It aims to provide a critical understanding of specific conspiracy theories as well as their background and seeks to contextualize conspiracy theories in terms of the reasons for their propagation and their methods of propagation. Discussions will be grounded in case studies of specific examples of conspiracy theories from the modern context. Topics to be addressed include: the epistemological divide concerning ‘post-truth’; working with the sociology of conspiracy theories; the relationship between conspiracy theories and electoral politics; role of social media; conspiracy theories and culture; global spread of conspiracy theories and exploration of specific conspiracy theories.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate a reflexive understanding of conspiracy theories.
- Analytically apply socio-political concepts to the study of conspiracy theories.
- Examine how the local and global interact in the spread and popularity of conspiracy theories.
- Critically examine the role of conspiracy theories in contemporary politics, culture and social media.

Policy on Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI)

Generative Artificial Intelligence (henceforth GAI, like Chat-GPT), can be a useful learning tool. It can help to understand and study. It should not be used to replace students’ own work. Students may use Generative Artificial Intelligence in accordance with relevant CEU policies.

Always be aware that it is unclear what happens to your data, including your own ideas and written work, when it is uploaded to a GAI site.

GAIs are **inappropriate tools for summarizing academic articles and can in no way substitute for an engagement with the original article**. AI may be helpful to provide various guides to reading (e.g. by prompting for a list and explanation of key concepts in the text, an outline of the arguments, or timelines discussed.) AI may, within bounds, also be helpful to discuss one's own understanding of and deductions drawn from the text. It is essential to be aware that information provided by AI (be that factual or logical) may not be taken for granted and may neither be complete nor factually correct.

Human thinking needs to stand at the beginning and at the end of the process.

Unacceptable uses of AI are the following:

- Using GAI to generate text for your essays or other assignments, including presentations, in full or in part, without proper acknowledgment or citation.
- Using GAI to “improve” your writing. Academic writing is a skill to be learned, and our focus is helping students develop their own ‘voice’ (even if the process is often cumbersome and messy). GAI gets in the way of that.

Course Requirements and Assessment

Mid-term writing assignment- 30%

- 1000-1500 words reflective writing piece (scheduled either during the halfway point of the course or a week after). The assignment will take the form of a short interview to be conducted with a person of their choice who might believe in/be sympathetic to a particular conspiracy theory. Students can then use the interview to frame an essay or a reflective piece using the interview. Through this, students will be able to reflect on the readings and better understand individuals who believe in specific conspiracy theories. The assignment itself is open-ended in multiple ways. Primarily, the guiding questions for the interview can be decided separately in consultation with the instructor. The aim of the interview is not to berate the person who believes in a specific conspiracy theory but to better understand their rationale and reasons for believing. Secondly, if a student believes in a specific conspiracy theory themselves, they are allowed to frame the assignment as a reflective piece on how and why they came to believe in it. If, however, a student wants to do neither of these, they can also choose to produce a 1000-word critique of a specific conspiracy theory from their own geography/area of interest using concepts covered in the first half of the course.

Rubric for grading: Reflexivity towards standpoint (35%), Engagement with course materials (35%), Writing style and content (30%).

Student-led presentation plus Handout- 20%

- Throughout the course, the first session every week (except week 1) will be led by presentations, by students either in groups or individually. For the presentation, students are free to present using the readings for the week, choose additional readings or go in depth into one of the conspiracy theories or any topic in discussion with the instructor. The presentation is an attempt to get students to engage with the literature and empirical material surrounding conspiracy theories but also to choose conspiracy theories closer to their own contexts/interests.

Accompanying the presentation should be a handout for individual members of the class to better understand the scope of the presentation and the finer details and points of emphasis. The handout can be in bullet points text but can also choose to include visuals, graphics, maps etc. The handout should be sent to the instructor a few days before the class and be made available to other students during the class.

Rubric for grading: Conceptual clarity in presentation (35%), Engagement/reflection with course literature/frameworks (35%), Facilitation of class dialogue (25%), Handout (5%).

Final project- 35%

- The final assessment is an open-ended assessment method which can be chosen in discussion with the instructor a week prior (or earlier) to the end of term. If the student chooses to do a writing piece, it requires a paper of around 2000 words related to the readings/aligned to the contents of the course. Students may alternatively choose to do a podcast (8 minutes), documentary (4-5 minutes), photo-essay (4-5 photographs with accompanying text) or any other multimedia format of choice. If the student chooses to do a podcast or documentary, it is essential that they have prior knowledge of how to use the equipment required for the same. Consultations with the instructor can be arranged for discussions on technical questions.

Rubric for grading: Conceptual depth and originality of topic (30%), execution in methodological/artistic terms (30%), Engagement/reflection with course literature/frameworks (30%), Positionality/clarity of communication (10%)

Class Participation- 15%

- Participation is an active, reflexive component throughout the course. As a pedagogical tool, it also serves the purpose of meaningful participation in classroom discussions and during peer presentations (including peer feedback), thereby making the classroom a more reflexive and helping foster a learning environment.

Rubric for grading: Transparent rubric that includes quality of contributions (insightfulness, evidence of engagement with course materials) (40%), engagement with peers (40%), expanding scope of discussion and respectful communication (20%).

Course Content:

Week 1: Introduction- What are Conspiracy Theories and Theorizing Conspiracy Theories

Seminar Prompts: What categorizes a conspiracy theory? Are conspiracy theories related to specific events?

Mandatory Resources:

Uscinski, J. E. (2018). Down the rabbit hole we go. *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*, 1-32.

Dean, Jodi. "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory." *Theory & Event*, vol. 4 no. 3, 2000. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.

Additional Resources:

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 40(Suppl 1), 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>

Prooijen, J.W., 2018. *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Routledge. Chapter 1.

Week 2: Rational vs irrational? Epistemology of conspiracy theories

Seminar Prompts: Are conspiracy beliefs human errors? How do conspiracy theories connect to scepticism?

Mandatory Resources:

Brashier, N. M. (2023). Do conspiracy theorists think too much or too little?. *Current opinion in psychology*, 49, 101504.

Samuels, Richard & Stich, Stephen (2004). Rationality and psychology. In Alfred R. Mele & Piers Rawling, *The Oxford handbook of rationality*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 279-300.

Additional Resources:

Pronin, E. (2007). Perception and misperception of bias in human judgment. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(1), 37–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2006.11.001>

Ross, L., & Ward, A. (2013). Naive realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding. In *Values and knowledge* (pp. 103-135). Psychology Press.

Week 3: History of conspiracy theories

Seminar Prompts: When did conspiracy theories emerge? How do conspiracy theories relate to cultural forms?

Mandatory Resources:

McKenzie-McHarg, A. (2020). Conceptual history and conspiracy theory. In *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 16-27). Routledge.

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2020). Conspiracy theory in historical, cultural and literary studies. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 28-42). Routledge.

Additional Resources:

Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight, 'The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary', in Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Dec. 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0002>,

McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew, 'Conspiracy Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of a Twentieth-Century Concept', in Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Dec. 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0004>,

Week 4: The 'postmodern' condition and conspiracy theories

Seminar Prompts: Does the current socio-economic predicament lend itself easily to conspiracy theories? Is there a relationship between capitalism and conspiracy theories?

Mandatory Resources:

Jameson, F. (2016). Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. In *Postmodernism* (pp. 62-92). Routledge.

Fassin, D. (2022). Conspiracy theories as ambiguous critique of crisis. In *Crisis under critique: How people assess, transform, and respond to critical situations* (pp. 403-420). Columbia University Press.

How did conspiracy theories become mainstream? | Naomi Klein | Big Questions
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFcf3GMiPis>

Additional Resources:

Tanguay, L. (2021). We, the Sheeple: Making Sense of Conspiracy Theory in the Context of Neoliberalism. *symploke* 29(1), 665-676. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sym.2021.0043>.

Week 5: 'How I got interested' or 'How I interested others'- The spread of conspiracy theories and social media

Seminar Prompts: Does social media force an affinity to conspiracy theories? How can we keep a check on spread of conspiracy theories through social media?

Mandatory Resources:

DeWitt, Darin & Atkinson, Matthew & Wegner, Drew. (2018). How Conspiracy Theories Spread. [10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0021](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0021)

Stano, S. (2020). The internet and the spread of conspiracy content. In *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 483-496). Routledge.

Why we are all attracted to conspiracy theories, The Guardian,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9xtpqXzyfA>

Additional Resources:

Zeng, J., Schäfer, M. S., & Oliveira, T. M. (2022). Conspiracy theories in digital environments: Moving the research field forward. *Convergence*, 28(4), 929-939. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221117474> (Original work published 2022)

Week 6: The blurring boundaries between satire and conspiracy theories

Seminar Prompts: Is one person's satire another person's conspiracy? What is the role of the absurd in conspiracy theories?

Mandatory Resources:

Caron, James E.. "1. Defining Satire". *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere: Postmodern "Truthiness" and Civic Engagement*, University Park, USA: Penn State University Press, 2021, pp. 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271090351-003>

Neville-Shepard, R., & Neville-Shepard, M. (2024). Conspiracy Theatre of the Absurd: "Birds Aren't Real" as Parodic Hypermimesis. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 54(4), 321-335.

Birds Aren't Real? How a Conspiracy Takes Flight | Peter McIndoe | TED
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VEkzweBJPM>

Additional Resources:

McIndoe, P., & Gaydos, C. (2024). *Birds Aren't Real: the true story of mass avian murder and the largest surveillance campaign in US history*. St. Martin's Press.

Week 7: Conspiracy theories and science

Seminar Prompts: Does instilling a 'scientific temper' help combat conspiracy theories? What role does the scientific community play in reducing belief in conspiracy theories?

Mandatory Resources:

Erlaine, D. M. (2020). The culture of flat earth and its consequences. *Journal of Science & Popular Culture*, 3(2), 173-193.

Dean, J. (1997). The Familiarity of Strangeness: Aliens, Citizens, and Abduction. *Theory & Event* 1(2), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tae.1997.0002>.

Philosophy, Conspiracy Theories, and the Origins of COVID-19|PBS|
<https://www.pbs.org/video/philosophy-covid-e1keqx/>

Additional Resources:

Pasek, Josh, 'Don't Trust the Scientists! Rejecting the Scientific Consensus "Conspiracy"', in Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York,

2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Dec. 2018),
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0013>

Pummerer, L., Böhm, R., Lilleholt, L., Winter, K., Zettler, I., & Sassenberg, K. (2022). Conspiracy theories and their societal effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 13(1), 49-59.

Uscinski and Enders. (2020, April). The Coronavirus Conspiracy Boom. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/what-can-coronavirus-tell-us-about-conspiracy-theories/610894/>

Week 8: Conspiracy theories and contemporary politics (External stakeholder guest lecture: TaCT-FoRSED Europe-wide research network- Professor Oliver Hidalgo and Dr Hannes Birnkammerer) (TENTATIVE)

Seminar Prompts: How do conspiracy theories enable populism? How does a liberal society deal with conspiracy theories? Do governments have a role in dealing with conspiracy theories?

Mandatory Resources:

Moore, A. (2016). Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic Politics. *Critical Review*, 28(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2016.1178894>

Bergmann, E., & Butter, M. (2020). Conspiracy Theory and Populism. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 330-343). Routledge.

Additional Resources:

Smallpage, Steven M., 'Conspiracy Thinking, Tolerance, and Democracy', in Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Dec. 2018),
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0012>

Julien Giry, Pranvera Tika. Conspiracy Theories in Political Science and Political Theory. Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, 2020. hal-02737242

Week 9: Conspiracy theories, gender and sexuality

Seminar Prompts: Do conspiracy theories reinforce gender norms? How do we deal with conspiracy theories that target marginalized groups in society?

Mandatory Resources:

Van Veeren, E. S. (2025). Taking the Red Pill: Conspiracy Theories, Gender, and the 'elusive epistemologies' of the Manosphere. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1.

Bracewell, L. (2021). Gender, populism, and the QAnon conspiracy movement. *Frontiers in sociology*, 5, 615727.

Additional Resources:

Zottola, A., & Borba, R. (2022). "Gender ideology" and the discursive infrastructure of a transnational conspiracy theory. In *Conspiracy theory discourses* (pp. 465-488). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Week 10: The EU and the global in conspiracy theories

Seminar Prompts: What makes conspiracy theories appealing across borders? Do conspiracy theories adapt to different contexts?

Mandatory Resources:

Krouwel, André, and Jan Willem van Prooijen. "The new European order? Euroscepticism and conspiracy belief." *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies*. Routledge, 2021. 22-35.

Cosentino, G., & Cosentino, G. (2020). From Pizzagate to the great replacement: the globalization of conspiracy theories. *Social media and the post-truth world order: The global dynamics of disinformation*, 59-86.

Pannofino, N. L. (2024). The "Global" Deception: Flat-Earth Conspiracy Theory between Science and Religion. *Genealogy*, 8(2), 32.

Additional Resources:

Plenta, Peter. "Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe." *Contemporary Politics* 26.5 (2020): 512-530.

Šteger, Tine. "The analysis of prevailing conspiracy theories in central and eastern Europe." *Journal of Comparative Politics* 17.1 (2024): 69-85.

Walter, Annemarie S., and Hugo Drochon. "Conspiracy thinking in Europe and America: A comparative study." *Political Studies* 70.2 (2022): 483-501.

Week 11: Conspiracy theories in fiction and film

Seminar Prompts: How do conspiracy theories serve as driving plots in film and fiction? How do cultural forms depict conspiracy theories and believers?

Mandatory Resources:

Bugonia (2025), Yorgos Lanthimos

X-Files Season 1 (1993), *Episode 1: Pilot*, Robert Mandel

Pynchon, Thomas. (1996). *The Crying of Lot 49*. Vintage Classics (excerpts)

Additional Resources:

George, N. (2021). The Instability of the World: The Examination of Paranoia and Conspiracy in The Crying of Lot 49. *IUP Journal of English Studies*, 16(4).

Moore and Campbell. (2004). *From Hell*. Top Shelf Productions

Eco, Umberto (1989), *Foucault's Pendulum*, Harcourt

Week 12: Combating and Engaging Conspiracy Theories in Europe

Seminar Prompts: What pedagogical approaches are necessary in the EU to combat the spread of conspiracy theories? Should conspiracy theories be treated as a problem of governance in the EU?

Mandatory Resources:

Dyrendal, A., & Jolley, D. (2020). Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom: Problems and Potential Solutions. *Religions*, 11(10), 494.

10 infographics to counter conspiracy theories, *European Commission*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en#documents

Interview with Hidalgo and Birnkammerer. (2024, October). Strengthening the self-healing powers of democracy against conspiracy myths. *Universitat Passau EU Horizons Project*. <https://www.digital.uni-passau.de/en/beitrag/2024/eu-horizon-project-tact-forsed>

Additional Resources:

Costello, T. H., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2024). Durably reducing conspiracy beliefs through dialogues with AI. *Science*, 385(6714), eadq1814.