

AMER 30382

Conspiracy Theories in American Culture

2015-16

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Office: N1.14, Samuel Alexander Building
- Seminar:** Friday, 12-3 (Stephen Joseph G4)
- Office Hours:** Friday 10-12
- Assessment:**
1. 1000-word analytical commentary (due week 8, 12 noon on Wednesday 13th April; return on 5th May), worth 20% of the final mark
 2. Class presentation and wiki entry (wiki to be completed by 12 noon on Monday 23rd May), together worth 20%
 3. 3500-word essay (due by 12 noon on Monday 23rd May), worth 60%

[Further information on the analytical commentary and essay will be provided in the list of questions/instructions. Instructions on electronic submission is on the Blackboard site.]

Outline

Although they may initially seem merely wacky or fun, conspiracy theories have played a surprisingly important role in American history and culture. This course provides an overview of this tradition, and offers you the chance to explore particular episodes and cultural texts in more detail. It looks at a range of source materials from the eighteenth century to the present. The aim is not to discover the truth or falsity of particular theories, but to consider why so many Americans have been drawn to this way of explaining their history.

Seminars

Each week the seminar will be divided into two parts. In the first half, we will focus on a historical case study, using a mixture of primary source documents, novels, films and websites. Our basic questions each week will be: what are the main theories, where do they come from, who believes in them, and what sense can we make of them? In the second half of the seminar each week, we will consider different theoretical and methodological approaches to conspiracy theories. The seminars will involve a mixture of group work, class discussion, mini lectures and student presentations. In the final week we will have a short seminar that will consist of show-and-tell reports on the most weird and wonderful conspiracy theories you've come across. I will give a prize to the wackiest one!

Presentations

In the final week of the course each of you will do a short presentation (max. 5 minutes) on the most intriguing conspiracy theory you've come across during the semester. You'll then turn this into a wiki

entry. Your presentation should provide information and offer interpretation. You will need to include examples and visual material; handouts and/or Powerpoint slides are always useful. The assessment sheet I will use will be posted on the Blackboard site to give you an idea of what constitutes a good presentation. Feel free to come and see me in Office Hours in advance to discuss your ideas for the presentation, and I will give you help on planning it.

Wiki

You will then turn your presentation into a wiki entry (within the Blackboard site). Using the materials gathered for your presentation, you will put together a short entry (c. 1000 words) on the topic, that will include images, clips and links as appropriate. The final deadline is 23rd May. The wiki entry allows other students to follow up on what you've outlined in your presentation, and it helps build your skills of presenting information in different media.

Essay Planning Tutorials

In place of a seminar in week 12 (Friday 13th May) I will hold individual tutorials to discuss essay plans. You will need to sign up for a time, and you will need to submit your one-page essay plan by Friday 6th May. The essay plan should include a bullet point outline of the main stages of your argument, as well as a brief list of the main books, articles and any primary sources you intend to use.

I will also be available in office hours to discuss ideas in advance of your class presentations, analytical commentary and wiki entry, as well as to offer further feedback on these assignments (in addition to the written comments on the presentation and commentary).

Readings

As well as the set reading each week, the most useful thing to do is immerse yourself in the plentiful culture of conspiracy theory that is available on the Internet. There are also countless popular and literary novels, as well as Hollywood thrillers.

Films

There are online versions of the films in Blackboard, and DVD copies in the Library, and also the English & American Studies Film Library. Feel free to arrange informal group screenings in the Learning Commons or at home.

Week 4 *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962 version)

Week 5 *JFK*

Week 7 *X-Files*

Set Texts to Obtain

1. Pack of Primary Source Documents (available on Blackboard, and to **collect from the EAC Office**)
2. Pack of Readings (available on Blackboard, and to **collect from the EAC Office**)
3. Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*
4. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

Library Collection

The Library is well stocked for books and articles on conspiracy theories and related topics. I have put the most popular items on High Demand. If you have difficulties getting hold of any items, speak to me and I will see what I can do (for example, I can scan a particular chapter from my own copy and put it on the Blackboard site).

Recommended Background Reading

In addition to the set reading and suggestions for further reading week-by-week, I recommend these books written for a non-specialist audience:

Lindsay Porter, *Who are the Illuminati?* [very readable account of the surprising persistence of a particular conspiracy fear]
Jesse Walker, *United States of Paranoia* [by a journalist; full of interest stories]
John Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground* [although this Canadian journalist has some idiosyncratic views, this is an appealing and wide-ranging survey of contemporary American conspiracism]
Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* [highly readable summary of the research conducted by psychologists]
James McConnachie and Robin Tudge, *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories* [good coverage, but sadly now out of print]
David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories* [an acerbic attack on conspiracy theories from the *Times* columnist]
Jon Ronson, *Them!* [a very engaging report of this journalist's encounters with conspiracy theorists]
Damian Thompson, *Counterknowledge: How we Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science and Fake History* [entertaining broadside from the *Telegraph* writer]

Main Academic Studies of Conspiracy Theories

These are the main academic works on the topic (many of which will feature in the seminars):

Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies*
Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within*
Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*
Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories* (rev. ed. 2008)
Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*
Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*
Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*
"We the Paranoid," www.american.edu/cas/wtp
Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (rev. ed. 2013)
Michael Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*
Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*

Additional Background Information

For a quick guide to each case study, begin with:

Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* [several copies in High Demand]

See also these two collections of primary sources:

David Brion Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy*

Donald Critchlow et al., eds, *Political Conspiracies in America*

Note: There is also an extensive bibliography on Blackboard, with full publication details for each item listed in this course outline. Feel free to ask me for recommendations for readings on particular topics.

Week 1

A. Case study: How to Make Sense of Conspiracy Theories

For this seminar we will look in detail at some primary source examples of conspiracy thinking in American culture, and begin thinking about how to make sense of conspiracy theories as a social, political and cultural phenomenon. Some of the basic questions we need to consider are: How popular are conspiracy theories? Who believes in them? Can you instantly recognise a conspiracy theory and/or a conspiracy theorist? Have the nature, style and function of conspiracy theories changed over time? We will also do a quiz to see how inclined to believe in conspiracy theories *you* are!

Set Reading (from the Primary Source Documents pack; also available on Blackboard, and photocopies will be supplied in class)

Jedidiah Morse, "A Sermon, Exhibiting the Present Dangers," p.23

"Adam Weishaupt, 1776, The Green Back, and All That," p.88

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory: Definitions and Popularity

We will begin by grappling with the problem of defining terms such as conspiracy, conspiracy theory and conspiracism, before going on to look at the question of whether conspiracy theories are inherently wrong.

Set Reading

Handout of definitions

Oliver and Wood, "Why are we so eager to embrace conspiracy theories?"

(both items available on Blackboard, and photocopies will be supplied in class)

Further Reading

Definitions:

Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, ch. 3

Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 2

Jovan Byford and David Aaronovitch on Laurie Taylor, *Thinking Allowed* on Radio 4

Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories*, 1-15

Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, ch. 1

Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories"

Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*

Pidgen, "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories"

Pipes, *Conspiracy*, ch. 2

Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*

DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*

Popularity:

Links in Blackboard folder

Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*

Week 2

A. Case study: Conspiracy Nation

Our first case study considers whether the template for American conspiracy theories was set in stone in the colonial era and/or the early years of the Republic. Both the witch scares of the 17th century and the American revolution itself were framed in the language of conspiracy, while the 1790s witnessed

the first of many waves of conspiracy-minded fears of foreign subversion. The vital questions to ask are: Where did these fears come from? What role does Puritanism play? Was conspiracy theory marginal or mainstream? Do these early conspiracy fears form the blueprint for subsequent American conspiracy thinking? We will also consider how conspiracy theories about the Illuminati are still central to conspiracy culture today, e.g. Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*. This week will also set up two of the central questions of the course: how has conspiracy thinking changed in America over the last three centuries? And why does America seem to have a particular affinity for conspiracism?

Primary Source Documents

Take a look at a range of entries for the Colonial and Revolutionary era (pp.2-26), but concentrate in particular on the following entries:

Cotton Mather (p.2)
Richard Henry Lee (p.7)
George Washington (Systematic Plan p.10, and Farewell Address p.16)
Declaration of Independence (p.12)
John Robison (p.19)
Alien and Sedition Acts (p.21)
Jedediah Morse (p.23)
Anonymous, "Adam Weishaupt" (p.88)

Suggestions for Further Reading

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, esp. ch. 1
Entries in *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* on Illuminati, Alien and Sedition Acts, Jedediah Morse, John Robison, Democratic-Republican Societies, XYZ Affair
Porter, *Who are the Illuminati?*, esp. ch. 3
Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*, ch. 1-2
Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*
Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*
Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy*
Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion"
Hünemörder, *The Society of the Cincinnati: Conspiracy and Distrust in Early America*

B. Theories of Conspiracy Theory: Psychology

One intuitive explanation for the popularity of conspiracy theories is that they fulfil a psychological function for their believers. Most researchers have started from the assumption that conspiracy theories are illogical and riddled with contradictions, and so we need to explain why some people are prepared to believe such weird things. Recently psychologists have begun to investigate the particular psychological traits that they think are central to conspiracy belief. One of the trickiest questions is whether conspiracy theorists are wired in a different way, or whether there is no real difference between conspiracy theorists and the general population.

Set Reading

Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, ch. 4

Further Reading

Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 6
Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion"
Goertzel, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories"
Butter and Knight, "Bridging the Great Divide"
Bilewicz et al., eds, *The Psychology of Conspiracy*

Week 3

A. Case study: The Money Power

In the late 19th and early 20th century a new conspiracy fear began to emerge. Whereas in the antebellum period conspiracist fears had focused on supposedly subversive groups such as the Masons, Mormons, Catholics or the slave-holding South, in the postbellum decades ordinary Americans began to worry about the increasing power of big business and the robber baron capitalists that in their eyes constituted a capitalist conspiracy. The loose coalition of Populist voices towards the end of the 19th century included disgruntled farmers, anarchists and socialists, and one of the central issues was the nature of the money supply (watch *The Wizard of Oz* again—it's all about the money debates of the 1890s). The question we need to ask is whether the Populists were paranoid country hicks who found a convenient scapegoat for their woes by blaming Eastern capitalists, or whether they were the much maligned fore-runners of current anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation protestors. But the flipside of this question is why Americans in the twentieth century have been less alarmed about big business than big government.

Primary Source Documents

E. J. Farmer, p.38

The Omaha Platform, p.40

William "Coin" Harvey, p.42

William Jennings Bryan, p.43

Suggestions for Further Reading

Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism"

Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*

Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks*

Sarah Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies*, ch. 1 [the complete pamphlet is included in this week's Blackboard folder]

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory: Hofstadter

This week we will look at Richard Hofstadter's seminal article exploring the history of the "paranoid style" in American politics. What are the defining characteristics of conspiracism, and is it always the same throughout time and across different societies? Does his characterisation of conspiracy thinking still apply today?

Conspiracy Theory Theory

Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"

Suggestions for Further Reading

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 1

Kay, *Among the Truthers*, ch. 1

"We the Paranoid," ch. 1-3

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, Introduction

Pipes, *Conspiracy*, ch. 1-3

White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theories"

Robins and Post, *Political Paranoia*

Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*

Week 4

A. Case study: Red Scares

There has been a long tradition of conspiracy-minded countersubversion in the US that has repeatedly demonised radical movements. In both the 1920s and the 1950s this form of political paranoia came to the forefront of American politics. We will concentrate on the McCarthy years, looking in particular at the first film version of Richard Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate*. The film is in part a satire on anti-Communist hysteria, but it also calls up issues of body panic and other fears about mind control. The central question, then, is why have Americans in particular been so obsessed with the idea that their minds and their bodies are controlled by alien forces?

Viewing

The Manchurian Candidate (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962)

Set Reading

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 3

Further Reading

Melley, "Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in Postwar United States"

Primary Source Documents, pp. 51 – 58, 64-67

Jacobson and Gonzalez, *What Have They Built You To Do?*

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 2

Butter, *Plots, Schemes, and Designs*, ch. 5

David Seed, *Brainwashing*

Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears*

Porter, *Who are the Illuminati?*, chapter 4 and 5

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory

Having looked in detail at Hofstadter's article, we will now look at some of the major challenges to his approach. One criticism is that at various times in American history it has made sense to believe in conspiracy theories, and this way of thinking has much in common with more mainstream ways of understanding historical causality. Other have suggested that the American government (rather than the paranoid fringe) is the real home of conspiracism, and even that the government has at times deliberately provoked popular fears.

Set Reading

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, introduction

Suggestions for Further Reading

Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style"

Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, ch. 3 and 5

Butter, *Plots, Schemes, and Designs*, ch. 1

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 1

David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Countersubversion"

Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie*, 272-88

Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*

"We the Paranoid," ch. 1-3

Week 5

A. Case study: The Kennedy Assassination

This week we will consider the event that is considered the motherlode of American conspiracy theories. We will focus on Oliver Stone's controversial film, *JFK*. This film will allow us to reflect on the question of who gets to tell public history in America, and the significance of conspiracy theories surrounding the event half a century later.

Set Viewing/Reading

JFK (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991)

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 4

Suggestions for Further Reading

Primary Source Documents: Oswald (p.58), Warren Commission (p.60), Torbitt Document (p.70), Sprague (p.74), Report of the Select Committee (p.78), JFK Assassination (p.84), Mailer (p.102)

Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 4

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 4

Simon, *Dangerous Knowledge*

"We the Paranoid," ch. 4

Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, ch. 4

Willman, "Traversing the Fantasy of the JFK Assassination"

Stone and Sklar, *JFK: The Documented Screenplay*

Posner, *Case Closed*

Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History*

DeLillo, *Libra*

Adam Gopnik, "Closer Than That," *New Yorker* (November 2013),

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/11/04/closer-than-that>

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory

Conspiracy theories revolve around questions of agency, causality and responsibility. As well as providing accounts of specific historical events, conspiracy theories in America have tended to be underpinned by a particular view about how history works, and who (or what) are the agents of historical change. This week we will begin to consider some of these more abstract philosophical questions about the ideology of political agency promoted by conspiracy theories, as well as the issue of whether this world view is in any way distinctively American.

Set Reading

Melley, "Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy," in Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*

Suggestions for Further Reading

Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, ch. 6

O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies*

Week 6

A. Case study: Counterculture Conspiracy

It's arguable that in the 1960s conspiracy thinking shifted from being associated with right-wing extremists to becoming on the one hand part and parcel of government operations, and, on the other, an attitude of doubt and distrust taken up by the many radical opposition groups protesting against the status quo. What happens to conspiracism when it is taken up self-reflexively by postmodern novelists such as Thomas Pynchon? *The Crying of Lot 49* is a tricky little novel. It seems to be the story of an all-consuming quest to get to the bottom of a massive conspiracy that dates back seemingly to the eighteenth century, but at the same time it features wacky characters such as The Paranoids, a wannabe British Invasion style pop group in sixties California.

Reading

Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 5

Suggestions for Further Reading

Coale, *Paradigms of Paranoia*, ch. 6

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory: Everything is Connected

One of the striking features of contemporary conspiracy theories is that they tend increasingly towards all-encompassing theories that attempt to plot all recent history into a larger conspiratorial framework. At the same time, however, like most conspiracy theories they rely on the idea that history is the result of the intentions of powerful individuals. In an increasingly complex world, is either of these basic tenets plausible? What does it mean when the guiding principle of both conspiracy theory and ecology is that Everything is Connected?

Readings

"We the Paranoid," ch. 4-7 [online multimedia book, link in Blackboard folder]

Suggestions for Further Reading/Viewing

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, ch. 6

Kelley, *Out of Control*, ch. 2 [link in Blackboard folder]

Adam Curtis, *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace* (BBC 2, 2011)

Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping"

Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Part 1

Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," in Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*

Images

There are links to a number of conspiracy "maps" in the Blackboard folder for this week.

Week 7

A. Case study: Enemies Without and Within

Stories about aliens from outer space have been around since Victorian times (perhaps even earlier), but it is only in the post-WWII period that they really come to take on prominence, and also to take a distinctly conspiratorial turn. Why is this? And why did *The X-Files* television series capture so neatly the zeitgeist in the 1990s?

Set Viewing

X-Files: Fight the Future (1998)

Set Reading

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 6

Set Primary Source Documents

"Alien/CIA Connection", p.89

Jason Jeffrey, "Brain Zapping," p.121

Suggestions for Further Reading

Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, ch. 5 and 6

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, ch. 6

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 4

Elaine Showalter, *Hystories*, ch. 13

Dean, *Aliens in America*, and "If Anything Is Possible," in Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*

Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 6

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory

The more alien abduction narratives you read, the more you begin to wonder: why do people believe weird things? Should we be looking for psychological or materialist explanations, or some combination of both? What are the connections between conspiracy thinking and other forms of "magical thinking," and is this a distinctively American way of viewing the world?

Set Reading

Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion"

[See also the video of Oliver's lecture in the Blackboard folder for this week, which is a user-friendly introduction to their research]

Suggestions for Further Reading

Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*

[See also the video of Shermer's TED talk in the Blackboard folder for this week]

Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*

EASTER BREAK

Week 8

A. Case study: The Colour Line

In the 1990s there emerged in the African American community in the USA a number of conspiracy theories that told of a co-ordinated plot to attack black men (e.g. crack cocaine had been deliberately imported into black ghettos, or that AIDS was a man-made in a biowarfare lab). More recently, many conspiracy theories circulated in black communities concerning the after effects of Hurricane Katrina. In addition, hip hop artists such as Tupac, Jay Z and Beyonce have espoused variations of the Illuminati myth. What are we to make of this so-called black paranoia?

Primary Source Documents

Elijah Muhammad, p.65

J. Edgar Hoover, p.67

President Clinton, p.110

[and your own individual web research, e.g. <http://www.jay-zilluminati.com>]

Set Reading

Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (short extract)

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 6

Suggestions for Further Reading

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, ch. 4

Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, ch. 4

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 5

Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, ch. 4

Turner, *I Heard It on Grape Vine*

Turner and Fine, *Whispers on the Color Line*

Quinn in Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation*

Bogart and Thorburn

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory

How should we understand the emergence of these theories? As the development of a distinctive black paranoia that underlined the damaging tendency of minority groups to blame others for their own self-made ills, or as a form of street-savvy political activism—or something else entirely? What would a Cultural Studies approach to conspiracy theory look like? And what is the relationship between conspiracy theory and populism?

Set Reading

Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 83-90 and Afterword

Further Reading

John Fiske, "Blackstream Knowledge: Genocide," *Media Matters*

Berlet and Lyons, *Right Wing Populism*

Week 9

A. Case study: The New World Order

Among the most prominent conspiracy theories of recent times is the umbrella theory about a secret cabal controlling the whole of modern history. This story is often told in terms the rise of the Antichrist and an apocalyptic plot to establish a "New World Order." This conspiracy narrative has its origins in the religious right and the particular creed of premillennial dispensationalism, but it has since become fused into other forms of popular conspiracism, not least antisemitism. One central question we need to consider, then, is the relationship between conspiracy theory and religion. Are these theories in fact just the continuation of the long tradition of antisemitic conspiracism?

Primary Source Documents

Pat Robertson, p.80

Police Against the New World Order, p.90

Michael Rivero, p.106

David Allen Rivera, p.108

Robert Gaylon Ross Sr, p.125

[and further individual web research, e.g. infowars.com]

Set Reading

Olmsted, ch. 6

Suggestions for Further Reading

Porter, *Who are the Illuminati?*, ch. 6 and conclusion

Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, ch. 3 and 4

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 6

Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, ch. 3

Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, ch. 3 and 4

Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*

B. Theories of Conspiracy Theory

Now we are reaching the end of the course, we are in a position to consider whether America is particularly prone to believing in conspiracy theories, and if so, why. What role does conspiracy theory play elsewhere in the world? We can also return to the question of whether conspiracy theories are more naturally to be found on the left or the right, and whether that distinction makes any sense now.

Set Reading

Jeff Pasley, "Conspiracy Theory and American Exceptionalism from the Revolution to Roswell"

Suggestions for Further Reading

Lecture by Matthew Gray:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWwZP3QcUTY> [Gray starts speaking at 12:30]

"We the Paranoid," ch. 7-10

West and Sanders, eds, *Transparency and Conspiracy*

Marcus, ed. *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*

Ortmann and Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space"

Week 10**A. Case study: 9/11**

Conspiracy theories about 9/11 have become the Kennedy Assassination of our age. Given that they are still very much in the process of formation, what conclusions can we reach about their origins, transmission and function?

Primary Sources

www.911truth.org (link in Blackboard folder)

Set Reading

Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, ch. 7

Suggestions for Further Reading/Viewing

Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, ch. 7

Kay, *Among the Truthers*

Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, ch. 10 and 11

Knight, "'Outrageous Conspiracy Theories'"

Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, ch. 5

B. Conspiracy Theory Theory

Having explore a wide variety of case studies, from the eighteenth century to the present, we need to explore two final issues. First, are conspiracy theories dangerous, or are they the unfortunate but necessary by-product of modern democracies? What should governments do about conspiracy theories, if anything? And second, what role does the internet play in shaping the future of conspiracy theories? Does contemporary information technology create the utopian possibility of the infinite and democratic transparency of all information? Or does the very nature of the Internet act as a breeding ground for unlimited conspiracism?

Readings

Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures"

Further Reading/Viewing

David Runciman, lecture at the Science and Conspiracy conference [link in Blackboard]

Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, ch. 2

Jolley and Douglas, "The Effects of Anti-vaccine Conspiracy Theories" and "The social consequences of conspiracism"

Kay, *Among the Truthers*, ch. 10

Bill Keller, "A Theory of Conspiracy Theories," <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/magazine/a-theory-of-conspiracy-theories.html>

Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Counter-terrorism and Extremism*: <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thepowerofunreason>

Week 11

In the final week of the course each of you will do a short presentation (3-5 minutes) on the most intriguing conspiracy theory you've come across during the semester. You'll then turn this into a wiki entry.

Also in week 10 and 11 there will be individual essay-planning tutorials.