

Paranoia and Conspiracy Theory

An exploration of how conspiracy thinking reflects history and culture

Course #	21FPAC
Format:	Seminar
Moderators:	Rachel Borson Ellie Rumelt
Date and Time:	Monday, 9:30-11:30 AM 10 weeks, starting 9/27/2021
Format:	Online
Maximum number of participants:	18
Auditors accepted:	No

Purpose: The seminar will seek to understand the American embrace of conspiracy thinking in several ways: research into eight well-documented conspiracy theories; examination of the contextual and historical grounding for each theory, and exploration of conceptual frameworks around conspiracy thinking.

Description: We are currently experiencing a spike in conspiracy thinking, but this is the evolution of our nation's historical embrace of paranoid thought and theory. At least half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory. The seduction of conspiracy may be the way it orders chaos, and the way in which these theories make people's suffering and alienation comprehensible. Using readings about conspiracy theory such as Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" and other writings on psychological, neurological and folkloric roots of conspiracy thinking, we will seek a framework for exploration during the first 2 weeks.

We will examine selected theories that have multiple available analyses, such as QAnon and the JFK assassination. Each week we'll consider one in detail. A complementary presentation the same week will set the stage for each conspiracy theory, with background on germane historical and social forces of the time, as well as of the persons most deeply involved.

Role of participants: Participants should be willing to partner in twos for this seminar, as each week one person will research and present background information during the first hour that will dovetail with the conspiracy theory in the second hour. Partnership will enable a deeper examination without repetition

The conspiracy theories to be examined have been chosen for the depth of documentation and analysis available for research, as well as for the breadth of topics (political, scientific, financial, etc.) and historical linkages. Theories and topics not on the list may be chosen only after discussion with the co-moderators.

Resources: *What is a conspiracy theory? The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, By Richard Hofstadter, Harper Magazine 1964. A bibliography of suggested essays and a list of conspiracy theories are provided in the on-line catalog.

About the Moderators: Rachel has become fascinated by conspiracy thinking during the past several tumultuous years. A retired physician, she has been a member of 5CLIR for almost 4 years, and this is her third time moderating a seminar. First time co-moderator Elly was a student of history before embarking on a fifty-year career in social work, where she engaged professionally with the interplay among individual beliefs and actions and their context.