

HUMN 17: GLOBAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES, CULTS & SECRET SOCIETIES

Foothill College Course Outline of Record

Heading	Value
Effective Term:	Fall 2026
Units:	4
Hours:	4 lecture per week (48 total per quarter)
Advisory:	One of the following: ENGL C1000 or C1000H or ESLL 26.
Degree & Credit Status:	Degree-Applicable Credit Course
Foothill GE:	Area 3: Arts & Humanities
Transferable:	CSU/UC
Grade Type:	Letter Grade (Request for Pass/No Pass)
Repeatability:	Not Repeatable

Student Learning Outcomes

- Analyze global conspiracy theories, cults, and secret societies using interdisciplinary scholarly frameworks
- Compare historical and contemporary examples to identify common patterns, functions, and cultural differences
- Evaluate sources and media related to conspiratorial claims for credibility, bias, and rhetorical strategy
- Explain the social, political, and psychological impacts of conspiratorial belief systems

Description

This course explores the cultural, historical, and philosophical dimensions of conspiracy theories, cult movements, and secret societies throughout history. Through an interdisciplinary humanities lens, students will analyze the emergence and evolution of these phenomena, and how they reflect and impact broader anxieties, beliefs, and power structures. Topics include ancient mystery cults, medieval heresies, secret orders, and the psychological and sociological factors that sustain them. The course emphasizes critical analysis of narrative construction, myth-making, and the use of secrecy and exclusivity in shaping cultural identity and social control. Students will engage with primary and secondary sources, including folklore, literature, chronicles, film, journalistic and popular media to examine how conspiracy and secret societies have been represented and why they persist in the collective imagination. This course emphasizes analytical, interpretive, and reflective approaches to human cultural production and belief systems.

Course Objectives

The student will be able to:

- Identify and explain key historical and cultural examples of conspiracy theories, cults, and secret societies within a global humanities context.

- Analyze the ways narratives of secrecy, conspiracy, and belief function within specific historical and cultural frameworks.
- Evaluate primary and secondary texts, media, symbols, beliefs, and artifacts to interpret how societies construct and respond to hidden or exclusive groups.
- Apply critical thinking skills to assess the ethical, political, and social implications of belief systems associated with conspiracies and secret societies.
- Articulate well-supported arguments that reflect an understanding of the humanities' methods of inquiry into human belief, power structures, and cultural identity.

Course Content

- What is a conspiracy theory? Global definitions and frameworks
 - Cross-cultural introduction to secrecy, belief, and social anxiety
- Ancient secret knowledge and initiation rites
 - Mystery cults and esoteric knowledge: Mesopotamia
 - Mystery cults and esoteric knowledge: India
 - Mystery cults and esoteric knowledge: Egypt
 - Mystery cults and esoteric knowledge: Greece
- Religious heresies and hidden enemies
 - Zoroastrian dualism
 - Jewish diaspora
 - Early Christianity
 - Islam
- Secret societies and revolutions
 - Freemasons
 - Illuminati
 - Chinese triads
 - Ottoman Bektashi orders
 - Thuggees
 - Bohemian Grove
- Anti-Semitic conspiracies: A global history
 - Protocols of the Elders of Zion
 - Nazi ideology and modern "Globalists"
 - Adrenochrome
 - Worldwide media control
 - The Jewish banker
- Colonialism, race, and paranoia
 - White flight and white genocide
 - Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey: Charities, vaccines, and schools
 - South African and Latin American case studies
- Cults and millenarian movements
 - Japan (Aum Shinrikyo)
 - Uganda (Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments)
 - USA (Heaven's Gate)
- Cold War and global espionage conspiracies
 - CIA
 - KGB
 - Operation Condor
 - Propaganda and myth in postcolonial states: Vietnam and Algiers
- 9/11, global Islamophobia, and "The Great Replacement"

- a. Western conspiracies about Muslims
- b. Global terrorism myths
- c. US immigration fears and policies
- 10. COVID-19, global health conspiracies, and digital culture
 - a. Anti-vax
 - b. 5G
 - c. Bioengineering fears
- 11. Conspiracy culture in the global south and digital diaspora
 - a. India (Hindutva conspiracies)
 - b. Nigeria (Soros and colonial paranoia)
 - c. Uganda (Bill Gates, women's health, and blocking out the sun)
 - d. Transnational movements
- 12. Student presentations
 - a. Integrating ideas
 - b. Reflecting on belief systems and cultural narratives

Lab Content

Not applicable.

Special Facilities and/or Equipment

When taught as an online section, students and faculty need ongoing and continuous internet and email access.

Method(s) of Evaluation

Methods of Evaluation may include but are not limited to the following:

Reflection papers on course themes
 Exams and quizzes covering key concepts
 Classroom presentations
 Research papers
 Discussion boards where students can discuss their thoughts and ideas about the course material

Method(s) of Instruction

Methods of Instruction may include but are not limited to the following:

Classroom lectures and discussion
 Instructor-guided interpretation and analysis of mixed media
 Individual or group presentations of major projects followed by in-class discussion
 Collaborative learning and small group exercises

Representative Text(s) and Other Materials

Webb, Jeffrey B.. Conspiracy Theories: A Reference Handbook. 2024.

Fritze, Ronald H.. Hope and Fear: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories, and Pseudo-History. 2022.

Uscinski, Joseph E., and Adam M. Enders. Conspiracy Theories: A Primer. 2020.

Although it is older than five years, the Uscinski/Enders text is considered something of a classic already and is highly recommended; Uscinski is the foremost scholar on conspiracy theories in the United States. Using this text as a supplement to more recent scholarship is helpful

to foundational theories regarding when and why conspiracy theories spread.

Types and/or Examples of Required Reading, Writing, and Outside of Class Assignments

1. Quizzes on terms and concepts (3)
2. Case study essays (2)
3. Case study group presentation
4. Final research paper comparing two or more conspiracy theories and their impact
5. Final research presentation
6. 30-40 pages weekly reading

Sample assignment: Conspiracy theory case study essay

1. Assignment overview: Choose one global conspiracy theory (historical or contemporary) and write a 3-4 page essay analyzing its origin, narrative structure, cultural function, and impact. Use at least two academic sources and one primary media artifact (e.g., image, video, article, or meme). Your essay should explain why the theory gained traction, who benefits from its dissemination, and at least 2 divergent arguments of what it may reveal about the society that produced it
2. Assignment objectives:
 - a. Practice critical reading and research skills
 - b. Apply interdisciplinary humanities analysis to a real-world cultural artifact
 - c. Reflect on the intersection of power, identity, and belief
3. Requirements:
 - a. 3-4 page, typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. font (Chicago format)
 - b. Bibliography with at least 6 sources (2 primary, 2 scholarly secondary, 2 popular secondary)
 - c. Thesis statement, organized analysis, and conclusion
4. Evaluation criteria:
 - a. Clarity and originality of thesis (20%)
 - b. Depth of analysis and contextual understanding (30%)
 - c. Integration of sources and textual/media evidence (25%)
 - d. Overall engagement and insight (15%)
 - e. Organization, grammar, and citation (10%)

Discipline(s)

Humanities