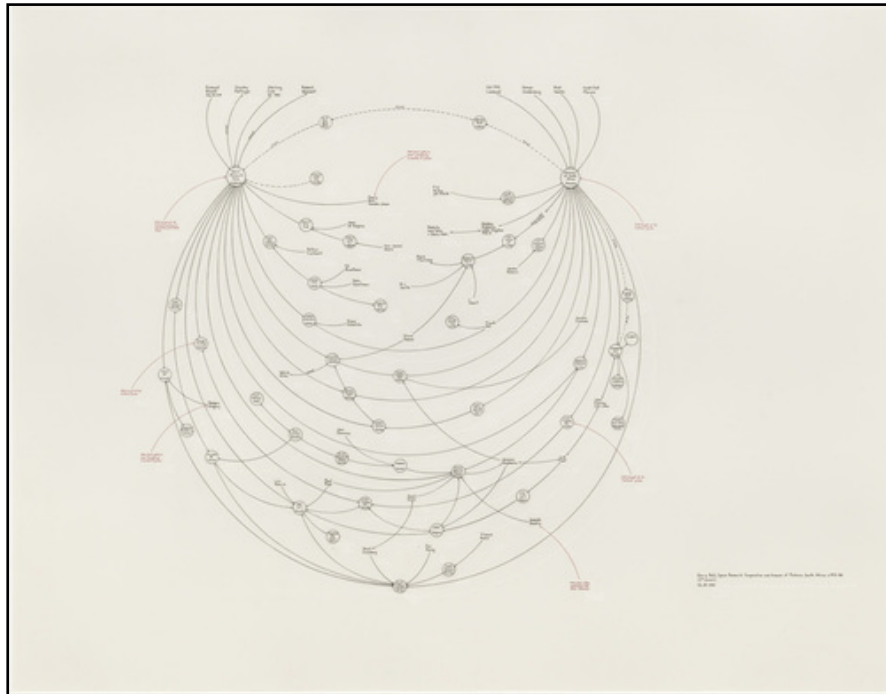


## HIST 457: History of Conspiracy Theories



*Gerry Bull, Space Research Corporation and Armscor of Pretoria, South Africa, c. 1972-80 (5th Version) – Mark Lombardi (1951-2000). Source: [Museum of Modern Art, New York](https://www.moma.org).*

**Instructor: Prof. Steven E. Harris**

**University of Mary Washington**

**This class meets Tu/Th, 3:30pm-4:45pm, Monroe 233**

**Office Hours: TR, 10:00am-12:30pm; and by appointment**

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### **Description**

Who *really* brought about the end of the Ancien Régime and the onset of the French Revolution? Who were the Freemasons and the Illuminati and what were their roles in modern history? Who killed Kirov and who *really* shot JFK? And, has there ever been an “October surprise”? These are only a few of the questions that people have attempted to answer through conspiracy theories. In this course, we will examine the history of this way of thinking about the world – conspiracy theories – from the American and French Revolutions to the War on Terror in a comparative framework across the modern world. Conspiracy theories have not been specific to any one country, political system, or religion, but rather have become a prominent way of thinking across borders in liberal democratic countries and totalitarian regimes; fully industrialized states and the developing world; and across political, class, religious, gender, and ethnic lines. Our goal is to investigate the origins of this way of thinking, its development over time, and its impact and place in modern life.

In this course, we will focus on the ways in which people have constructed and used conspiracy theories to explain events and the world they live in, but also who they are. We will

study the role conspiracy theories have played in modern political events and ideas such as the French Revolution, Stalin’s Great Purges, and Nazi ideology, as well as the social context and culture of conspiracy theories – in other words, the individuals, social groups, communities, and sub-cultures that have promoted and believed in conspiracy theories, as well as those who have been their targets. We will also examine those who debunk conspiracy theories and what is at stake for them in exposing the irrational aspects and false claims of conspiracy theorists.

**Assignments**

Class participation:	20%
Blog essays:	10%
Book review:	15%
Research paper proposal and bibliography:	15%
Lombardian representation of research paper conspiracy theory	5%
Research paper and presentation:	35%

**Readings**

DeDillo, Don. *Libra*. New York: Viking, 1988.  
 Gray, Matthew. *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2010.  
 Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.  
 Pipes, Daniel. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York: The Free Press, 1997.  
 West, Harry G. and Todd Sanders, eds. *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

**Schedule**

- January 17: Introduction: Thinking historically about conspiracy theories
- January 19: Foundations of a Historical Paradigm  
 \* Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (blog)  
 \* discuss book review instructions and choose books

**The French and American Revolutions: Crucibles of Modern Conspiracy Theories**

- January 24: \* Bailyn, “A Note on Conspiracy” (blog)  
 \* Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century” (blog)
- January 26: \* White, “The Value of Conspiracy Theory” (blog)  
 \* discuss paper proposal and bibliography instructions
- January 31: \* Amos Hofman, “Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion” (blog)  
 \* Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution” (blog)  
 \* discuss research paper instructions

### **Debunking Conspiracy Theories**

February 2: \* Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 1-128.

February 7: \* Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 129-201.

### **The Social and Cultural Functions of Conspiracy Theories**

February 9: \* Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 1-75.

February 14: \* Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 76-142.

February 16: \* Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 143-244.

**February 20: \* Paper proposal due today, 12pm**

February 21: \* Paper proposal presentations (8)

February 23: \* Paper proposal presentations (7)

February 28: \* The art of Mark Lombardi (blog)

March 1: \* Practicing the art of Mark Lombardi: bring a preliminary draft of your Lombardian representation of your research paper conspiracy theory

**Spring Break: March 3-11**

### **Conspiracy Theories in Film and Literature**

March 13: \* viewing and discussion of *Seven Days in May* (1964)

March 15: \* viewing and discussion of *Seven Days in May* (1964)

March 20: \* DeLillo, *Libra* (read entire book by today)

March 22: \* DeLillo, *Libra*

### **Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World**

March 27: \* Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World* (1-87)

March 29: \* Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World* (88-140)

April 3: \* Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World* (141-172)

### **Conspiracy Theories: A Language of Explanation for an Age of Globalization**

- April 5: \* West and Sanders, *Transparency and Conspiracy*, 1-124.
- April 10: \* West and Sanders, *Transparency and Conspiracy*, 125-174.
- April 12: \* West and Sanders, *Transparency and Conspiracy*, 175-299.
- April 17: \* Research paper presentations (4)
- April 19: \* Research paper presentations (4)
- April 24: \* Research paper presentations (4)
- April 26: \* Research paper presentations (3)
- May 3: Deadline for final papers, 3:30pm**