UNIV 4242 (HIST 4730) **Conspiracy Theories** Spring 2026

Eric G. Swedin, PhD http://www.swedin.org/ eswedin@weber.edu
Office: LH274 History department: 801-626–6706
Office hours: Tues and Thurs: 11:30 - 11:50 AM; Weds: 5:00 - 5:20 PM
Other office meetings are available by appointment via email.

Texts: David Robson, *The Intelligence Trap: Why Smart People Make Dumb Mistakes* (W. W. Norton, 2021) ISBN-10: 0393541460

Tamim Ansary, *Truther Narratives: Conspiracy Theory Explained. What it is. How it forms. Why it spreads* (Kajaki Press, 2024) ISBN-10: 0998262331

Additional Resource: Christopher R. Fee and Jeffrey B. Webb, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in American History* (ABC-CLIO, 2019) - https://hal.weber.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=2112877

Class Description and Objectives: Why do people believe conspiracy theories? What are their origins? How can we avoid succumbing to conspiracy theories? How do we use critical thinking and learn to recognize our own biases?

Class participation and discussion is expected.

Grading Policies: Grades will be determined on the following basis:

Quizzes	50%
Conspiracy Presentation	20%
Essay on Class Learning	20%
Class Participation	10%

Grades: A: 90 - 100% B: 80 - 89% C: 70 - 79% D: 60 - 69% E: 0 - 59%
(Grades at the high or low ends of these ranges will earn plus and minus grades)

Readings: The readings for each day are available on Canvas or listed on the Schedule in this syllabus (though Canvas will be more reliable as readings may change).

Quizzes: There will a short quiz every day at the beginning of class. Each quiz will be based on the readings that you were given for that day, or will be given on the content of the previous class's conspiracy presentations. There may also be a couple of questions from previous quizzes' content.

Conspiracy Presentation: Each student will select a conspiracy theory (which must be approved by the instructor so that we don't have students picking the same conspiracy theory) and give a 30 minute presentation on that conspiracy theory.

The student must explain:
- what the conspiracy is
- who believes in it
- offer an argument of why the conspiracy is not true
- offer possible reasons for why people subscribe to such a theory

Religious topics as conspiracy theories will not be accepted.

Essay on Class Learning: A ten-page paper reflecting what you learned in this course is required. This paper may concentrate on a theme or an argument, or can cover the whole course, and can also include your own research. Cite your sources if you bring in material other than what was covered in the course. The first draft may be turned in early. I will return a critique of this draft within the following week. The due date for the final draft is on the schedule. Please do not use ChatGPT or similar artificial intelligence products in writing your paper.

Cheating Policy: Cheating and deceit are not accepted at Weber State University. Cheating on an quiz or assignment, or turning in someone else's work as your own, will result in an E for the class. You may work together on your assignments and papers, but you must turn in your own work. If you quote from a book, article, or web site, you must properly quote and cite your work. Avoid even the appearance of cheating or plagiarism.

Recording Classes: Video or audio recording of any portion of lectures is only permitted in this class upon my authorization. If you would like to request authorization to record, please contact me. Unauthorized recording is a violation of the Student Code of Conduct, for which a student may be subjected to disciplinary action under PPM 6-22, Student Code. Students who seek to record for purposes of accommodating a disability should contact the Disability Services Office at (801) 626-6413 or dsc@weber.edu. See more info at https://www.weber.edu/disabilityservices.

Cell Phones, Texting, and Laptops: Put your cell phones on vibrate. Try to avoid leaving class to take a call, but an occasional emergency is understandable. There will be NO texting in this class. Laptops or other personal digital tools may be used to take notes or look up material relevant to class discussions. No other uses of laptops will be tolerated.

Students with Disabilities: Any student requiring accommodations or services due to a disability must contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) in Room 181 of the Student Service Center. SSD can also arrange to provide materials (including this syllabus) in alternative formats if necessary.

Learning Outcomes:

1) Develop an understanding of conspiracy theories in the past and in the present, why they are formed, and how to analyze and refute such theories.
2) Learn different modes of learning and fact formation.
3) Engage in critical thinking that is open-minded, objective, and as free as possible from prejudice and presupposition.
4) Develop discussion skills and writing skills.

Institutional Policies: Available at https://www.weber.edu/wsuimages/academicaffairs/Forms/DigitalAddendumtoCourseSyllabus.pdf

Campus Closure: In the event of an extended campus closure, please look at your Weber State email in order for instructions on how we will continue the class via email and the Canvas online course system.

WSU Recycling Policy: Weber State University is dedicated to being a leader in sustainability to ensure present needs are met without compromising the ability for future generations to inherit a healthy planet, society, and economy. Part of this commitment includes sustainable waste management practices with the ultimate goal of becoming a zero-waste campus. In order to achieve this goal, it is up to the WSU community to be informed about the various recycling policies on campus. For more information on recycling at WSU, please reference Energy & Sustainability Office website.

Schedule: Look on Canvas for the daily reading and viewing assignments.

Daily Schedule:

January 6 (Tuesday): Introduction to class

January 8 (Thursday): Readings: Fee and Webb, Introduction and First Three Thematic Essays (pages xix-xxix, 3-20)
https://hal.weber.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=2112877

January 13 (Tuesday): Readings: Fee and Webb, Second Three Thematic Essays (pages 21-37)
https://hal.weber.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=2112877

January 15 (Thursday): Readings: Shermer, *Conspiracy* (Apologia, Prologue, and the first chapter, available on Canvas)

January 20 (Tuesday): Readings: Ansary, pages 1-81

January 22 (Thursday): Readings: Ansary, pages 82-156

January 27 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 1-37;
The Intoxicating Pleasure of Conspiratorial Thinking WIRED.pdf (from Canvas)

January 29 (Thursday): Readings: Robson, pages 38-64;
IWasATeenageConspiracyTheorist.pdf (from Canvas)

February 3 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 65-85;
ParanoidStyleInAmericanPoliticsHarpersMagazine-1964.pdf (from Canvas)

February 5 (Thursday): Readings: Robson, pages 86-114;
ConspiratorialThinkingIsAnAmericanDisease.pdf (from Canvas)

February 10 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 115-137;
The Era of Faked CCTV Has Truly Arrived _ Wired.pdf (from Canvas)

February 12 (Thursday): No Class (LTUE)

February 17 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 138-163; TBA

February 19 (Thursday): Readings: Robson, pages 167-212

February 24 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 214-237;
Cognitive Biases and the Human Brain - The Atlantic.pdf (from Canvas)

February 26 (Thursday): Readings: Robson, pages 238-260;
Why the Most Educated People in America Fall for Anti-Semetic Lies.pdf (from Canvas)

March 3 (Tuesday): Spring Break

March 5 (Thursday): Spring Break

March 10 (Tuesday): Readings: Robson, pages 261-270; Handout on "How Online Information Exploits 'Information Voids'"

March 12 (Thursday): Students #1 and #2 conspiracy presentations

March 17 (Tuesday): Students #3 and #4 conspiracy presentations

March 19 (Thursday): Students #5 and #6 conspiracy presentations

March 24 (Tuesday): Students #7 and #8 conspiracy presentations

March 26 (Thursday): Students #9 and #10 conspiracy presentations

March 31 (Tuesday): Students #11 and #12 conspiracy presentations

April 2 (Thursday): Students #13 and #14 conspiracy presentations

April 7 (Tuesday): Students #15 and #16 conspiracy presentations

April 9 (Thursday): Students #17 and #18 conspiracy presentations

April 14 (Tuesday): Spare day

April 16 (Thursday): Debrief and summing up
Essay on Class Learning due