Teaching the History of Conspiracy Theories, Rumors, and Hoaxes

During the late summer of 2021, a new conspiracy theory emerged that "Critical Race Theory" was a left-wing plot to force white children to hate themselves. Scholars of Critical Race Theory were surprised that suddenly the analytical framework, usually only found in college classes and in some law schools, was suddenly front-page news and the source of such vitriol. Many teachers found themselves facing harassment and surveillance. This latest, but not the last, example of a conspiracy theory wracking the world emerged as I was developing the first iteration of my course "A Global History of Lies: Conspiracy Theories, Rumors, and Hoaxes." The CRT obsession also underscores a longer historical thread of racism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism in the history conspiracy theories, rumors, and hoaxes in the United States and the rest of the world.

I am applying for an IDF to develop and enhance this course. I am currently teaching it as a 300-level experimental course, but I will get it put on the books as a 200 level course with ICC designations, including Diversity. Briefly, I believe that the course is of critical importance to students across campus and I want to make it as accessible as possible. Conspiracy theories, rumors, and hoaxes, historically, intersect with a number of themes that Ithaca College has committed to exploring and unpacking.

Central Issue/Concept
To date I have published two journal articles on the history of conspiracy theories and disinformation. I have also participated in a Social Science Research Council on teaching disinformation, and I have presented research on the topic at major conferences. And yet, I have found teaching this subject to be far more challenging than I had anticipated. First, the course is historical, but we must start in the present moment, and I was surprised how difficult it was to get students to think analytically about a topic that has inflamed so many passions. Second, much of the scholarship on disinformation is written at a very high level. Some of the most theoretically sophisticated works require a high level of background information. Third, conspiracy theories, both in history and in the current moment, have strong overlays with misogyny, racism, and anti-Semitism. Teaching this course requires students to engage in difficult conversations about the historical legacy of hatred and to think about how targeted communities have found resilience. Fourth, it is challenging to guide students to distinguish between what is actually happening in a given historical period and the rumors or false information that is circulating.

Scope & **Implementation**

The challenges listed above are interlocking. Moving the course to a 200-level approach will require reading, reviewing, and assessing a wide body of literature. A thorough literature review is proving more daunting than I had previously imagined. On a regular basis, I come across new bodies of work covering the topic from every corner of the earth. Some of that work will also involve taking published work and essentially digesting and editing the material to render it more undergraduate friendly. The goal will be to develop a "Global History of Lies Reader" that compiles select passages from key primary and secondary texts.

Connected to this work will be the creation of an outward facing website that can curate and present key scholarship. I believe that such a website would attract attention from scholars and students from around the globe. I have been researching who is teaching on the topics of disinformation and misinformation, and to date I have no history courses. The field is well

represented in political science, sociology, information science, etc. My course appears to be an innovation in the field of history. I believe that a website will attract interest from secondary teachers and college instructors.

 Finally, I will present initial findings around the pedagogical and historiographic goals and challenges of teaching this course. My ideal destination will be workshops and conferences hosted by the Social Science Research Council which has devoted an increasing amount of attention and resources to the topics of interest here.

Costs

$500-purchase of books related to conspiracy theories, rumors and hoaxes
$500-tech support to develop a high level "Teaching Conspiracy Theories"
$500-support attending a conference or workshop

IDF Proposal: Jonathan Ablard

Books to Purchase (the list below exceeds the $500 in budget)

Béla Bodó, *The White Terror: Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919-1921*(Routledge) $48.95
Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman, *Conspiracy Theories and Latin American History* (Routledge) $44.95
Kelman, David. Counterfeit Politics. Secret Plots and Conspiracy Narratives in the Americas. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. (out of print)
 Freije, Vanessa. *Citizens of Scandal: Journalism, Secrecy, and the Politics of Reckoning in Mexico*. (Duke University Press, 2020). $27.95
 Ben Carver, et. Al. *Plots: Literary Form and Conspiracy Culture* (Routledge) $160

 Ilya Yablokov and Precious N Chatterje-Doody, *Russia Today and Conspiracy Theories: People, Power and Politics on RT* (Routledge) $59.95

Andreas Önnerfors and André Krouwel, *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies* (Routledge) $44.95

 Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make us Look Foolish"* (Routledge) $46.95

Gonzalo Soltero, *Conspiracy Narratives South of the Border: Bad Hombres Do the Twist* (Routledge) $160
Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford) $20.00
Doğan Gürpınar, *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: Conspiracy Nation* (Routledge) $22.95
Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (Virago) $13.95

Conference

With Mian Chen, PhD candidate at Northwestern University, we are planning a panel on approaches to the global history of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Mr. Chen's research is on Chinese Communist Party propaganda. Our conference venue of choice is the American Historical Association

which will meet in Philadelphia, PA, in early January 2023. The deadline for proposal submission is February of 2022.

The total cost of the AHA conference would run to around $1000 so I would offset the IDF grant with regular conference travel funds. In a typical year, I max out my travel allowance as I attend and present at a number of conferences.

Registration: $184

Hotel for three nights: $500

Transportation (gas, parking): $100

Meals: $200

Website Development

I want to produce a very professional looking and accessible website and I know that I will need technical support and advice. I propose hiring a team of students in the spring to develop the website. I've consulted with colleagues in ITS and in Park and it is feasible, allowed by Ithaca College rules, and will offer the added benefit of connecting students whose focus is on technology to the humanities. I have budgeted $500 for this part of the project.

Expected Outcomes

With support from the IDF, I will be able to build a 200-level history course that will fulfill Diversity and ICC themes and perspectives. As such, my goal is that the class will attract students from across campus whose course of study and future careers may likely be impacted by the growing problem of disinformation and misinformation (Journalism, Medicine, Film and Screen studies, Public Health, Education). To date there are no good clearinghouses of information and resources on teaching this topic, so I am confident that a well-designed website will attract attention and use from scholars, teachers, and students around the world. My longer-range outcome is that my work will generate greater interest in studying and teaching on the history of this issue that is so central to contemporary life.