



Extremism & Conspiracy Theories



HONR 302T: Extremism and Conspiracy Theories (3 units)

Course Details

Instructor

Prof. Joshua DiPaolo
H-311C

Office Hours

Tu/Th 2:20-3:20pm, W Zoom 9-10am
AND By Appointment

Email

jdipaolo@fullerton.edu

Class

GH 204

Course Website

Canvas

Tech Support

Student Help Desk
(657) 278-8888

studentithelpdesk@fullerton.edu

Course Readings

All readings freely available on Canvas

Course Summary

Extremism and belief in conspiracy theories are on the rise. We cannot understand the current political moment without understanding the nature of extremism and the lure of conspiracy theories. To prepare you for political engagement in contemporary society, through the study of a wide range of real-world cases, this course will help you understand and critically examine extremism and conspiracy theories. The course will be divided into three main units:

1. **The Extremism Web:** We will explore the nature and various forms of extremism.
2. **Conspiracy Theories:** We will ask what makes something a conspiracy theory, how conspiracy theories work, why people believe conspiracy theories, and whether and when belief in conspiracy theories is warranted.
3. **Solutions:** We will conclude the course by identifying possible solutions to the problems encountered throughout the course

Truth-Seeking

In a philosophy class, you are a truth-seeker, not a mere information consumer. Rather than just learning what others have thought, you will aim to rationally justify your own answers to course questions.

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of this semester, you should be able to:

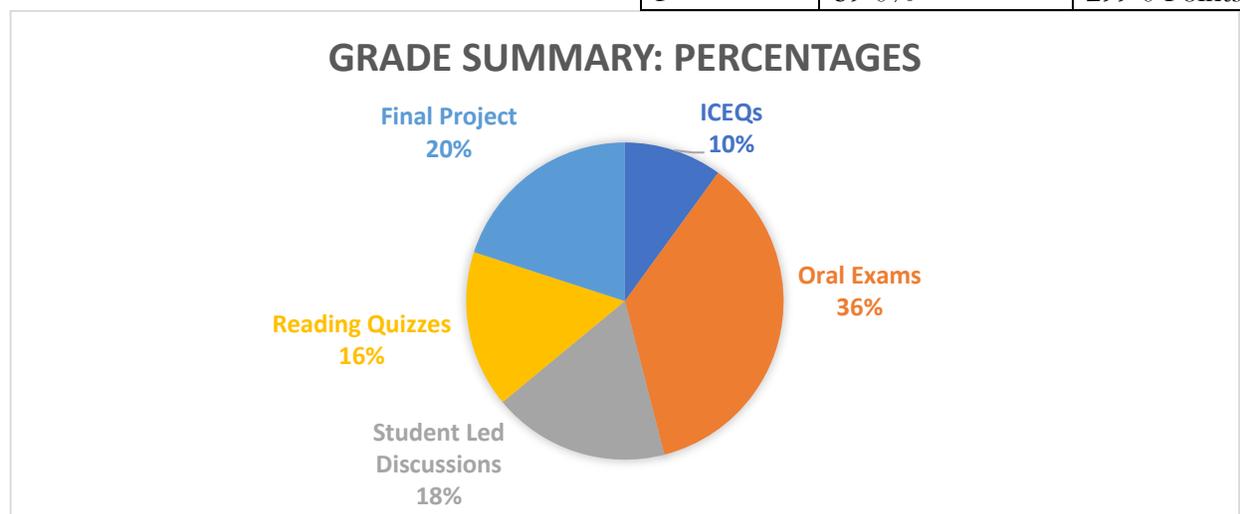
- I. Characterize, distinguish, and recognize varieties of extremism.
- II. Describe causes of extremism and deradicalization.
- III. Justify your own (tentative) stance on questions about the morality of extremism.
- IV. Analyze and evaluate the logic and rationality of conspiracy theories and conspiracism.
- V. Analyze barriers to deradicalization and explain promising solutions to problems associated with extremism and conspiracy theories.
- VI. Explain some of the threats to democracy posed by extremism and conspiracy theories.
- VII. Apply philosophical and political theories of extremism and conspiracy theories to case studies and current events.

Table 1: List of letter grades, associated percentages, and course points

Course Assignments	
ICEQS (5)	50
Oral Exams (2)	180
Student-Led Discussions (2)	90
Reading Quizzes (8)	80
<u>Final Project (1)</u>	<u>100</u>
Total	500 Pts

LETTER GRADE	PERCENTAGE	POINTS
A+	98-100%	490-500 Points
A	92-97%	460-489 Points
A-	90-91%	450-459 Points
B+	88-89%	440-449 Points
B	82-87%	410-439 Points
B-	80-81%	400-409 Points
C+	78-79%	390-399 Points
C	72-77%	360-389 Points
C-	70-71%	350-359 Points
D+	68-69%	340-349 Points
D	62-67%	310-339 Points
D-	60-61%	300-309 Points
F	59-0%	299-0 Points

Please read coursework descriptions carefully.
Please ask questions if you're not sure you understand them.



Grade Summary Pie Chart 1

Grading Policy/Class Assignments



ICEQs: 6 ICEQs/Lowest Score Dropped/ 10 pts. each. ICEQ stands for: Insight, Connection, Error, and discussion Question. These assignments help you engage with a reading and prepare for class discussion. For each of these assignments, you must do three of four things. You can choose which to skip for each assignment, and you can feel free to do them all. Also, the three things need not be connected to each other.

1. Identify an insight in the assigned reading and explain why you find it insightful.
2. Make a connection between the reading and something else (from our class, from another class, from life, etc.).
3. Identify a philosophical error in the reading – something you think is false or mistaken – and briefly explain why you think it's an error.
4. Raise a question for class discussion, including enough background that will help the class understand how the question relates to the reading and where the question is coming from.

These are not carefully crafted essays; they are more like bullet points. They will be used to guide class discussion. Please be prepared to discuss any part of your ICEQ in class. **Submit them to Canvas at least one hour before the class in which we will discuss the reading.** There is no specific due date for this assignment. **You must complete three ICEQs before each oral exam.**

Oral Exam: *2 Exams/90 pts. each.* To ensure that you understand the material, you will take two oral exams. Here's how they work. Approximately a week before the exam, I will share essay-style questions with you. During the oral exam, I will randomly choose two of these questions to ask you. You and a classmate (or two) will come to my office at a scheduled time, and then you will answer the questions. The exam will be 20-30 minutes in length. Although it wouldn't be a bad idea to have written out answers to the questions, you cannot simply *read* your answers aloud. The exam will be fairly conversational. You will be scored on accuracy, completeness, and preparation.

Student-Led Discussion: *2 Class Discussions/50 pts each/Your lowest score will be dropped and your highest score will be doubled.* You will be assigned to a group and your group will lead discussion during two class periods. For each period, you will choose/be assigned one of the assigned readings, and you will (1) create a handout, (2) summarize, (3) raise questions about, and (4) lead discussion of the paper during that class period. You should *not* just read your notes like a script. More details to come. But know in advance: this is the hardest assignment of the course!

Reading Quizzes: *8 Quizzes/10 pts each.* To ensure that you are prepared to participate in class during the Student-Led Discussions, we will take reading quizzes on the days these assignments take place. They will be multiple choice quizzes that test comprehension of the reading. They may be administered online (during class), so please bring some device (e.g., laptop or phone) that enables you to access online quizzes.

Final Project: *1 project/100 pts.* I want you to enjoy and care about your final project. Before Spring Break, you and I will together craft an individualized project based on your interests and strengths that allows you to follow your curiosity and demonstrate your learning how you see fit.

Attendance and Participation Policy

- **Participation:** 25 points will be deducted from your final grade if you do not regularly participate or you are distracting in class.
- **Attendance:** 2 free absences. 4 points will be deducted from your final grade for an unexcused absences, starting Week 3.

Late Assignments: Assignment due dates are set to help students achieve learning goals associated with assignments in a timely manner. However, usually I would prefer that students complete assignments late rather than not at all. So, if you cannot complete an assignment on time please let me know. If I believe you will still achieve the same or a similar learning goal by completing the assignment, I will let you turn it in late.

Extra Credit: Any extra credit, if given, will be offered on an equal basis to all students and will be described in class and in writing with ample lead time to do the work.

Communication



Office Hours: I will have Office Hours at the times listed above, and by appointment. You can drop into my scheduled office hours. If those times don't work, you should **ABSOLUTELY** feel free to set an appointment with me. Use the Scheduling Script to schedule a time to meet. **I want to help you succeed!**

Scheduling Script

Want to schedule a meeting outside of office hours, but not sure what to say? Feel free to use this script:

“Hi Josh/Professor DiPaolo,
I’m in your [CLASS NAME & TIME]. I’d like to schedule an appointment with you outside of your scheduled office hours. Do any of these times work for you [LIST THREE DIFFERENT TIMES YOU CAN MEET]?
Thanks,
[NAME]”

Contact: Emailing me is best! Check the syllabus first if asking about the course.

You: I expect you to regularly check your email and Canvas for announcements.

- Regularly check your junk email folder too!

Ask a Question Boards: On Canvas, there will be two “Ask a Question” discussion boards: (1) “Ask Josh a Question” and (2) “Ask Peers a Question.” I will regularly check (1) and rarely check (2). You should check both often.

- Questions on these boards should be general. Think: “Could someone else benefit from knowing the answer to this question?”
 - If Yes, post.
 - If No, email me.
 - **If you have a question about the course, please check these boards before emailing.**

Academic Integrity & Plagiarism

According to [UPS 300.021](#), “Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to cheating on examinations or assignments, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, falsification/fabrication of university documents, any act designed to give unfair academic advantage to the student..., assisting or allowing any of these acts, or the attempt to commit such acts.” Please only submit work that is your own. Doing otherwise is one of the worst mistakes you can make in your academic career. The penalty in this course for academic dishonesty is a failing grade. The incident is reported to the [Office of Student Conduct](#) for additional action, if warranted. Confirmation of plagiarism precludes you from being eligible to repeat the course under the university’s course repeat and grade forgiveness policy.

ChatGPT & AI Policy

None of your work in the class should be generated or produced by ChatGPT or AI technology. If I discover that any of it is generated or produced by AI, I will seek the most severe punishment for plagiarism. By the way, I hate this policy! But I care more about your learning. I am open to revising this if you can convince me of good reasons to adopt an alternative policy. Let’s talk!

Make a Good Impression: Education is a **professional environment**. One day you may want a letter of recommendation from me. You may want your peers to recommend you for some professional position. Assume you will want these things, and behave accordingly.

Tentative (Very Ambitious!) Schedule

Week 1 Course Introduction

1/23 NO CLASS

1/25 Syllabus & Class Introductions

Listen: Extremism *The Philosopher’s Zone*

Week 2: Thinking about Extremism and Conspiracy Theories

1/30 Cassam How to Think about Extremism

2/1 Uscinski Why Study Conspiracy Theories?

Week 3: Studying Conspiracy Theories and Hate Speech

2/6 Carlson Hate Speech: Introduction

2/8 Uscinski What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Week 4: Science Denial and the New Conspiracism

2/13 McIntyre What is Science Denial?

2/15 Muirhead & Rosenblum The New Conspiracism Chs. 1-2

Week 5: Conspiracy Mindsets

2/20 Brotherton Conspiracy Minded

2/22 Hofstadter The Paranoid Style in American Politics (original)

Week 6: Who are Conspiracy Theorists

2/27 Uscinski & Parent Who Are the Conspiracy Theorists?

2/29 Uscinski & Parent Conspiracy Theories are For Losers

Week 7: Conspiracy Theories and Games

3/5 Berkowitz A Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon

In-Class Listen: She was a popular yoga guru, then she embraced QAnon

3/7 NO CLASS: Watch *Merchants of Doubt*

Week 8: Oral Exams

3/12 ORAL EXAMS

3/14 ORAL EXAMS

Week 9: The Extremist Mindset

3/19 Cassam The Psychology of Extremism

3/21 Battaly Can Fanaticism be a Liberatory Virtue?

Week 10: Gender, Sexuality, and Extremism

3/26 Lopes What Do Incels Want?

3/28 Llanera The Misogyny Paradox and the Alt-Right

SPRING BREAK

4/2 NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

4/4 NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

Week 11: Chilled Speech and Heating Effects

4/9 Simpson The Chilling Effect and The Heating Effect

4/11 NO CLASS

Week 12: Dehumanization

4/16 Smith Paradoxes of Dehumanization

4/18 Killmister A Metaphysics of Dehumanization

Week 13: Conspiracy Theorists, Extremists, and Intellectual Vice

4/23 Pigden Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?

4/25 Nguyen Epistemic Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Week 14: Solutions?

4/30 Van Prooijen Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories

5/2 Young Disinformation as the Weaponization of Cruel Optimism

Week 15: Final Project Consultations

5/7 Final Project Consulting

5/9 Final Project Consulting

FINALS WEEK

5/14 10-11:50am ORAL EXAMS

5/15 Noon FINAL PROJECTS DUE

General Education

This course satisfies (1) C.3 Explorations in the Arts & Humanities, (2) Overlay Z Cultural Diversity, and (3) the GE Writing Requirement

C.3 Explorations in the Arts & Humanities

Overall Learning Objectives

After completing course requirements in Area C, students shall

1. Cultivate their intellect, imagination, sensibility, and sensitivity through the study of the arts and humanities.
2. Understand and explicate major concepts, themes, and imagery found in the arts and humanities and recognize aesthetic qualities and processes that characterize works of the human intellect and imagination.
3. Understand how significant works in the arts and humanities respond to and address enduring problems of human existence.
4. Appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of the arts and humanities, including disciplines both within and outside the arts and humanities.

Students taking courses that are Explorations in the Humanities shall (C.2 Learning Objectives):

5. Cultivate their intellectual reasoning skills, expand their capacity for creative imagination, develop their reasonable moral sensibilities, and increase their capacity for sensitive engagement through studying great works of human imagination and reason (which are to be primarily—although not exclusively—written texts and literature).
6. Understand how the humanities have contributed to the development of culture, including the comparative study of the humanities in diverse cultures.
7. Understand how the humanities have sought to provide answers to complex problems facing humanity, including the relationship of the self to culture and the natural world, the nature of moral and legal obligations, and the meaning and purpose of human existence.

Students taking courses that are Explorations in the Humanities shall (C.3 Specific Learning Objectives):

8. Understand broad, unifying themes from cross-disciplinary perspectives in the humanities.
9. Understand the relevance of the humanities for the thoughtful consideration of complex contemporary problems.
10. Appreciate the complex relationship and interaction between the humanities and other fields of learning, including the natural sciences, social sciences, and arts.

Overlay Z Learning Objectives

Students completing courses in Overlay Z shall:

11. Demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which culture, difference, and otherness are socially constructed and fundamental to social interaction in an inter-connected world.
12. Demonstrate reflection and appreciation of the complex relationships that various factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, class, and exceptionality bring to a discussion of society and culture.
13. Demonstrate a critical understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression play out across a range of cultures, human experiences, intersecting social locations, and historical experiences, including but not limited to one's own experiences.
14. Recognize how one's own cultural histories and practices mediate one's own sense of self and relationships to others.
15. Describe and understand how to enact ethical and transformative frameworks and modes of exchange and communication that promote rights, social justice, equity, and inclusiveness.

The Writing in this course meets the GE Writing Requirement.

“General Education courses shall include student writing appropriate to the course. Writing in General Education courses shall involve the organization and expression of complex data or ideas. Instructors shall provide careful and timely evaluations of writing so that deficiencies are identified and suggestions are offered for improvement on subsequent writing in the course. Evaluations of the student's writing competence shall be used in determining the final course grade. When a student is enrolled in a combined lecture and laboratory course, the laboratory portion of the course may be used to satisfy the General Education writing requirement.”

To receive GE credit for this course, students must earn a grade of D or higher.