Institute for Conspiracy Theory Analysis

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Teaching About Conspiracy Theories

Q&A with Dr. Luke Ritter

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Luke Ritter is an assistant professor of American history in the Department of History and Political Science at New Mexico Highlands University who taught a semester long class on conspiracy theories. He is interviewed by Kali Raglin, a graduate student at California State University—Northridge. This interview has been edited for clarity.

Kali Raglin: You taught an entire class on conspiracy theories, why did you decide to focus on this topic?

Luke Ritter: I thought students would be interested in the topic. But the other reason I wanted to teach it is because I've been thinking myself a lot about why people adopt certain conspiracy theories. What is the nature of conspiratorial thinking? And to what degree can educators like myself maybe influence the populace to think more clearly about certain claims?

Raglin: What were the key areas you covered in the in the class?

Ritter: I selected a popular conspiracy theory in American history to every two weeks. So we went over QAnon first, then we jumped back to the Salem witch hunt. Then we looked at anti-Catholic conspiracy theories from the 1840s and 1850s. Then we looked at the JFK assassination conspiracy theory. Then, we did UFO sightings, and 9/11 truth [movement].

For the final part of the class, the students got to pick a conspiracy theory to research. What is the conspiracy theory? What is the relevant historical context that may have given rise to belief in this particular conspiracy theory? Pick a couple of the conspiracy theory's main claims and analyze them. Is there any way for us to tell if these claims are true or false? How are you leaning after doing your analysis? I was encouraging them to think about history, and I was also encouraging them to use reasoning.

Raglin: What were the most important concepts you used to talk about conspiracy theories?

Ritter: [Joseph E.] Uscinski and [Joseph M.] Parent's book was very helpful in that regard. It's called **American Conspiracy Theories**. I'd highly recommend it. In chapter two, titled, *"But is it true?"* they talk about the sort of structure of conspiracy theories and give students some tests, like, alright, so you hear you hear a claim about something? How can you put that claim to the test? What I asked students to do is apply these tests to claims that people have made in the past. I even dare them to apply these tests to some of your own beliefs and see and see how they hold up.

Raglin: What understanding of the topics did your students bring to the class?

Ritter: Almost every student in the class expressed interest in a particular conspiracy theory like chemtrails, or the JFK assassination or UFO sightings. So, they each kind of had a pet conspiracy theory that they were sort of following. Even students who didn't really believe in any of them, still found themselves interested in certain claims.

Raglin: You were teaching in a history department? How did that affect what you taught?

Ritter: Each discipline has different methods that they apply. So psychologists are going to talk about conspiracy theories in a different way than historians do. For me, I focused on the historical context and how these conspiracy theories activated social movements and affected politics and broader social.

Raglin: What part of the class content did your students struggle with the most?

Ritter: Oh, that's, that's easy. The moment that I brought up reasoning, everyone seemed to struggle with it. I don't know if that's because the content was especially tedious and difficult, or because they didn't really feel like analyzing their favorite conspiracy theories in a sort of cold and calculating way. The process we went through is called Bayesian reasoning. Thomas Bayes was a mathematician who came up with a theorem for hypotheses. It basically gives you a formula for how to weigh evidence.

Prior probability is an important factor in this equation. So when you hear a claim, one of your first sort of “sniff tests” is, how typically is that claim true? Have I seen things like that before? What Bayes theorem forces you to do is put a percentage value on it. How likely is it on a scale of 1 to 99 percent? How likely is this claim to be true based on what you've experienced? If you can't think of any examples in your lifetime of said thing happening, then it has a low prior probability, which means that in order to overwhelm that suspicion at the beginning, you would need you wouldn't need evidence, extraordinary evidence that outweighed your initial hunch.

The example I give is a lottery ticket. I don't think that I'm going to win the lottery, and I'm not going to play the lottery because it seems to me that it's very unlikely to win. Based on all my experience, I don't know anyone who's won, I haven't won. I know the statistics. It just seems unlikely, right? If someone told me that they knew someone who won, I would be somewhat skeptical. But if they showed me the lottery ticket, and it had the winning numbers, then that claim is true. So, all you need is the right evidence, and your initial hunch, your initial suspicion can immediately dissipate.

Raglin: What did you learn about young people's understanding of the topic from teaching this class?

Ritter: The types of conspiracy theories that students seem to be really interested in were not actually what I expected. I'm in New Mexico, and they were more into UFOs. A lot of them marked on a survey that they were like convinced that the government was hiding UFO technology from us. QAnon didn't go over so well; they weren't as interested in that one.

The JFK assassination is one of the most popular American conspiracy theories of all time. If you do polls of Americans, it's like 60 percent of Americans believe that there were multiple shooters involved. Not just Lee Harvey Oswald, which was the mainstream narrative. I thought that when we got to that, students would be like, “Oh, this is for my parents. My parents were interested in this topic. I don't really care.” But when we got into it, many of the students were super enthusiastic about it. A few of them chose to write projects on it.

I started to see that maybe I was introducing them to more conspiracy theories, rather than removing some of their false beliefs.

Raglin: Did you talk about at all about COVID-19?

Ritter: That came up a lot as a topic that I should discuss, but I didn't include it. I promised the students that if I taught the course, again, I would.

One of the students in particular, was very adamantly anti-vaccine. She wrote her paper on the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine and how it may or may not be linked to autism. I tried to kind of sway her on this. We had long conversations via Zoom and I tried to point out that in developing the MMR vaccine, for example, it's very rare in world history, to have such a large collection of data to work with. We have been giving the MMR vaccine to children for 40 years and in every, population. We're talking about millions upon millions of people who have taken the vaccine. I was just saying it's very rare to have such a large sample from which to draw your conclusions and the data pretty clearly shows that there's no link. It's not that once MMR came into use autism rose or something like that. There’s no correlation between the two. I was trying to reason with her, but so far, unsuccessfully.

Then I had another student, a graduate student, actually, who works as a nurse. She told me that she and some of her cohort were refusing to get the COVID-19 vaccine. That if they were forced to get it, they were going to quit. I said, why not take it? Why would you lose your job over that? She said that she wants to have a baby eventually and she's afraid that the COVID-19 vaccine will cause infertility.

That's one of the things that I experienced. We start talking about these topics and many of them very sincerely believe in these things, and it affects their everyday experience.