

Summer 2019

Course: Liberal Arts

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In this 10-week course, students will be exposed to a variety of liberal arts topics that challenge assumptions about themselves, their societies and how we come to know and understand the world. A major theme of the course is media literacy: how is it that we have notions about the world, about our societies and cultures, and about other people, if not through direct interaction, then through media and education? Understanding what media is and how it functions in the world is crucial to our everyday understanding, and also influences how we learn about and discuss other topics, including those of this course. The course itself is composed of multiple modules, each detailing a unique area of interest. Students are expected to read a number of articles per module, and will engage with films, documentaries and other content as a source for class discussions. The development of highly critical and compassionate scholars is a major goal of the course.

Modules

Media Literacy

In this module, the media as an institution – or set of institutions – and media as vehicles for content are discussed. Various media techniques for persuasion and propaganda are discussed, as are fallacies of logic and rhetorical techniques. Students are asked to evaluate media they confront daily – from billboard advertisements, to radio broadcasts, to digital platforms – and these techniques of persuasion and propaganda are further dissected. Issues and questions given special prominence in this module are: how do media serve or challenge power?; who has access to media and how may differential access influence public understanding of marginalized groups?; how do representations of particular groups of people influence how these people are broadly understood in the public?; how do the biases that viewers/users of media ‘bring to the table’ influence understandings of media? Students watch such speakers as Chimamanda Adichie and Stuart Hall, and view the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*. Tools and critical thinking skills learned in this module are emphasized throughout the semester.

Conformity, Obedience and Social Control

Continuing with themes of influence and power, classic social psychology experiments are discussed at length within this module. Philip Zimbardo’s so-called “Stanford Prison Experiment” and Stanley Milgram’s “Obedience to Authority” experiment are discussed, with the aid of documentary footage. Students are asked to evaluate the classic interpretations of these experiments, and discussions centering around contemporary examples are encouraged. Students read articles on Muhammad Ali’s conscientious objector claims, Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, US border child detention facilities, and an academic article on the psychology of trauma and torture.

Moral Philosophy and Moral Paradoxes

This module briefly discusses some prominent schools of thought in moral philosophy, including utilitarianism, deontology and moral relativism. These discussions primarily are centered around Philippa Foot's "trolley problem", where students are asked to evaluate the moral choices available to a hypothetical individual forced to choose between the path a trolley will take on a track, and the consequences of this choice in terms of human deaths.

Meditation and Mindfulness

This brief module is intended to both introduce mindfulness and relaxation techniques to the students (as a measure towards stress management), and to discuss the psychological and physiological benefits mindfulness practices may bring. Over-exposure to digital technologies are also discussed, and students are asked to share any techniques they use to manage stress or enhance creative thinking.

The Islamic Golden Age

Notions of 'Western civilization' or 'Western culture' are highly problematic and, if historically defensible as a concept, must nonetheless square the inherent racism of the notion. Still, the interactions 'Western' or European cultures had with the rest of the world are underappreciated, especially the debt owed to the scholars of the Islamic Golden Age (8th to 14th centuries). This module explores the contributions to science, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, poetry, language and education these scholars and their societies made – not just to the 'West', but to the world writ large.

Sex and Gender

The terms "sex" and "gender" are often conflated, but most contemporary social researchers have come to a consensus that sex refers to biology, while gender is a social construct. This module breaks down what that means, and discusses how gender is constructed differently in different societies (for example the Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria; the hijra in India). Students learn about and discuss the idea of both sex and gender as spectrums rather than dichotomies. Terms and concepts such as non-binary, gender non-conforming, transgender, and intersex are defined and interrogated – as well as the distinctions between sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity. Students are required to read "Sex Redefined," a 2015 commentary in the science journal *Nature*, which demonstrates that even the biological categories of "male" and "female" are not always mutually exclusive categories. Videos in which transgender and intersex people speak for themselves, are utilized in order to humanize these "Others."

Feminism

This module introduces students to the basic definition and core concepts of feminism, both as a political/social movement and as an analytical lens that can be applied to almost any field of study. Media literacy skills are recalled and exercised as part of this module, as students are challenged to critique gender roles in the media. Students discuss the concepts of masculinity and patriarchy, and the ways in which cultural norms in a patriarchal society can be harmful to both men and women. Topics covered range from sexual assault and sexual objectification (including self-objectification), to perceived or claimed cognitive differences between the genders. Students discuss the flexibility, diversity, and breadth of feminism(s), and debate whether that diversity of thought is a strength or a weakness for feminism as a political and/or social movement. Cross-cutting concepts are also discussed, such as the distinction between equality and equity. The module ends with an introduction to and discussion of intersectional feminism – what it means as a subversive critique of power structures with roots in critical race theory. On completion of the module, students should have a much more nuanced understanding of “feminism” (or feminisms) than they had before.

Neoliberalism

Notions of ‘development’, ‘(un)developed societies’, the ‘Third World’ and other highly politicized terms are often employed in discourse surrounding Burundi. This module seeks to deconstruct these, and other, terms in order to understand the global political and economic landscape, and the logic of, and effects from, neoliberal reforms of the past several decades. Liberalism as a philosophical movement beginning with the Enlightenment is discussed, as are contemporary examples from Africa, America and elsewhere. Students are tasked with critically evaluating their culture and society, the history of political thought and how intellectual thought intersects with power. Finally, students are asked to evaluate social and other problems in moral and ethical terms.

Durkheim and Suicide

As societies are re-arranged by technology, changing demographics, and the socio-economic policies instituted by the state, the social relations between individuals are disrupted. Durkheim’s classic analysis suggested that decaying social relations can contribute to ‘anomie’, or a lack of social cohesion. Students are briefly exposed to the ideas of Durkheim, and Marx’s notion of alienation, as conceptual tools to understand, among other things, trends in suicide, drug use/addiction, ‘mass shootings’, conspiracy theories, and other symptoms of the loss of meaningful social connections.

Faith Healing

This module takes into account the cultural context of Burundi, where many people believe that pastors or other religious authority figures have the ability to cure people of serious ailments such as cancer or HIV/AIDS. The first half of the module has students examine and discuss

neurobiological phenomena, such as the placebo effect; the use of hypnosis to eliminate pain; and the roles of adrenaline and dopamine in our experience of music. The second half of the module interrogates the phenomenon of faith healing, and students analyze the way in which expectations, adrenaline, and hypnotic states can temporarily affect people's perceptions of pain and healing. Ancillary concepts and beliefs are discussed as well, such as the so-called prosperity gospel and Christian sects in the US that refuse, for instance, to seek medical treatment for their children. The ultimate learning goal here is not to make students question their faith or religious beliefs, but to encourage skepticism and critical thinking in cases where that faith is used to manipulate people.

Cross-cutting topics

Various cross-cutting topics with the summer Science and Humanity course are made apparent. Race and ethnicity as social constructs, spurious relations between race and IQ, and eugenics and phrenology as justifications for racialized and imperial policies are emphasized. Throughout the Science and Humanity course and this course, students are encouraged, and expected, to be broad in their thinking and interests, and develop an interdisciplinary perspective on the world.

Selected Readings

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