Course Proposal: History of European Racism

The Western World’s rise to political, economic and often cultural dominance in the Modern Period has frequently been accompanied by discrimination, colonization, enslavement and even the physical destruction of hundreds of millions of human beings – both within Europe and throughout the rest of the world. The perpetrators of these deeds initially justified them by focusing on the alleged political or economic “harmfulness,” or religious or cultural “inferiority,” of those exploited or abused. In the 18th century, however, a new rationalization for such mistreatment began to appear: “racial inferiority.” Unlike prior rationalizations, “racial inferiority” presupposed immutable “bad” characteristics that could not be eradicated through education or conversion. During the 19th century, this idea gained ever-increasing currency. It reached its apogee, however, as a rationalization for many of the unprecedented genocides of the 20th century. Why did this new apology for mistreatment of other human beings come into being in the 18th century? Why did it gain such potency over time? This course seeks to provide answers to these questions.

The study of racism is, primarily, the study of the development of an idea and its effects on human actions. Because powerful ideologies do not grow in a cultural vacuum, we will study the development of racism in conjunction with the development of other major European cultural, political and economic movements of the last three centuries. We will begin study of racism’s intellectual pedigree with an examination of Enlightenment thinkers and their quest for “rational” explanations of phenomena. Throughout the course we will concentrate to a large degree on the increasing embrace of racism by many in European scientific communities – a process of considerable importance to the growth of the ideology. We will also examine how and why other important European institutions incorporated, resisted or ignored racist thought. Moreover, in order to understand the interplay between racism’s development and the societies in which it developed, we will study the related history of the main activities for which racism served as an ideological foundation. Namely, economic and social discrimination, slavery, imperialism and pillaging on an unprecedented scale. We will also examine the relationship between racism and discrimination based on religion, class, ethnicity and gender. We will seek to understand why racist thought met with greater approval in certain countries (and at certain times). Essentially, we will attempt to contextualize racist ideology and policies within modern European history: to understand how they both grew out of, and influenced it.

Our principal method for this effort will be the reading of primary and secondary sources relating to the development of racist ideas. We will consider the arguments of both proponents of, and antagonists to, racism over time, as well as how historians and other academics have later represented the development of these ideas. Through the use of a variety of texts, written by authors in several academic disciplines (history, anthropology, sociology), and from different periods, we will also have a chance to acquaint ourselves with the historiography of racism, i.e. how “histories of racism,” as well as history in general, is created.

Classes will consist of lectures and in-class discussions. Students are expected to attend every class session and discuss the readings; participation and attendance will account for 10% of the grade. There will be an in-class exam (around the sixth week of the semester), one 10-page paper based on the readings, and a final based on the required readings and lectures.

The required books [provisional] are:


We will also use a reader with excerpts from [provisional]:


Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

Ashley Montague, Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race (Cleveland: Meridian, 1967)


Tentative Schedule [assuming two lectures per week]:

Background: The Idea of the “Other”
Group antipathy in classical, medieval and early modern times based on a conception of fundamental out-group difference – primarily cultural and religious.
Hannaford, 3-16; Mosse, Introduction
Racism and the Age of Discovery
European reactions to the first sustained contacts between modern Europeans and indigenous cultures in Asia, Africa and the Americas.
Hannaford, 147-184; Reader: Montague

The Enlightenment and the Idea of Race
The first modern conceptions of “race” with concentration on prominent Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Hume.
Hannaford, 187-202; Ross, 55-64

The Birth of Anthropology and the Scientific Idea of Race.
The beginning of human classification using scientific concepts, with a concentration on Blumenbach and Herder.
Hannaford, 202-233; Mosse, 1-34; Ross, 11-31

Racism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade
Brief history of European slave trade with an emphasis on the use of racism to justify that trade.
Reader: Thomas

Racism and Colonialism: Building Empire
Brief history of the establishment of European colonial empires with an emphasis on the use of racism to justify their creation.
Ross, pp. 33-54

Racism as the Key to History: Gobineau
In depth analysis of Gobineau’s *On the Inequality of the Human Races*, concentrating on his arguments, the social and cultural milieu in which he wrote the work, and the later influence of his book.
Hannaford: 264-72; Reader: Gobineau

Racism and Genocide (I): Destruction of Indigenous Peoples
Brief history of destruction of native populations during the establishment of European colonies, with an emphasis on the Americas, China the Belgian Congo, and German Southwest Africa.

Racism and Imperialism: Sustaining Empire
Racism as an ideological tool for the maintenance of colonial empire, concentrating on Great Britain and France.
Ross, 65-77; Reader: Füredi

Racism and Religious Bigotry.
Intersection of biology and theology in European conceptions of Jews and other non-Christians.
Hannaford, 87-126; Mosse, 113-127

Darwinism and Social Darwinism
The first “scientific revolution” in biology – Darwin’s *Origin of Species* -- and the rapid application of Darwin’s ideas to human relations.
Mosse, 51-76; Reader: Gasman and Shipman

Genetics and Eugenics
The second “scientific revolution” in biology – the rediscovery of Mendel’s laws of heredity – and their rapid application to human relations.
Hannaford, 335-341; Reader: Gasman and Shipman
Racial Science
The institutionalization of racist ideas in European scientific communities.
Mosse, 77-93; Reader: Gasman, Shipman and Gould

Race and Religion in 19th and early 20th Century Europe
Overview of the attitude of the major European Christian denominations to racism in this period.
Mosse, 128-149

Race and Nationalism
Conceptions of national groups as biological entities and the use of racism to promote national identity.
Hannaford, 235-55; Mosse, pp. 35-50; Reader: Poliakov

Race and Class
The ideology of racism as a component of class struggle: “science” as a political tool for and against socialism.
Hannaford, 335-341; Reader: Barkan and Gould

Race and Paganism
Late 19th and early 20th century development of (primarily German) pagan cults that fetishized the idea of race.
Hannaford, 127-46; Mosse, 94-112

Mid-Term Exam

“European” Racism in the United States to the early 20th Century
Overview of the role of Eurocentric and Nordic racism in American expansion, slavery and immigration policy.
Reader: Shipman, Thomas and Gould

Racial anti-Semitism
Conceptualizing Jews as a biological entity with an emphasis on Drumont (France) and Marr (Germany).
Hannaford, 315-323; Reader: Field

Emigration, Urbanization and Embourgeoisement: Race and Demographic and Economic changes to 1914
The effect of the industrial revolution and associated social changes on the growth of racial ideology in Europe.
Reader: Gould

Racism as the Key to History: Chamberlain
In depth analysis of Chamberlain’s Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, concentrating on his arguments, the social and cultural milieu in which he wrote the work, and the influence of his book.
Reader: Chamberlain and Field

Race and Politics in Europe in the Interwar Period (I): Europe Exclusive of Germany
The use of racism as a political tool in Europe, 1918-33.
Mosse, 150-168; Reader: Barkan and Gould
Race and Politics in Europe in the Interwar Period (II): Weimar Germany
The use of racism as a political tool in Germany, 1918-33. Was there a difference with the rest of Europe?
Mosse, 171-190; Reader: Hitler

The Racial State (Germany 1933-45)
Description of the institutionalization of racism in a modern state.
Reader: Burleigh and Wipperman

The Racial Continent (Europe 1933-45)
Describes the institutionalization of racism in Nazi occupied Europe with an emphasis on both Nazi ideology and policy, and the reactions of occupied populations.
Mosse, 191-214; Reader: Dallin

Racism and Genocide (II): the Holocaust
Institutionalized racism as an explanation for the Holocaust. Discussion on its sufficiency as an explanation.
Mosse, 215-231

Racism and Genocide (III): Other WWII Genocides
The "forgotten genocides" of WWII, i.e. Nazi occupation policy in Eastern Europe.
Reader: Dallin

Racism in Europe after the Third Reich
The continuity of racist thought after the Second World War.
Hannaford, 369-76; Mosse, 232-237

Racism Outside of Europe after the Third Reich.
Racism in the Americas, Australia and South Africa.
Reader: Montague and Gould

Non-European Racism
The use of racist ideology by "non-European" peoples.
Ross, 121-142

What does "Race" Mean and Why Does it Matter?
Contemporary notions of race with an emphasis on scientific definitions.
Hannaford, 376-401; Ross, 199-218; Reader: Montague

Wrap-up.
Contextualization of racism within European history.

Final Exam