Winter 2019 Syllabus

SOC 304: 
THE POLITICS OF RACIAL KNOWLEDGE

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

On a daily basis we consume—often without notice or concern—a substantial amount of racial knowledge. We routinely ingest, for example, infographics about demographic trends, media coverage on crime and undocumented immigration, and advertisements for ancestry tests. In complex and contextually specific ways, this diet shapes our personal and collective identities, social interactions and relationships, and political aspirations and anxieties. In this course, we endeavor to study the politics of racial knowledge—that is, the ways in which categories, measurements, and other techniques of knowledge production have helped to constitute “race” as a seemingly objective, natural demarcation among human populations and institute forms of racial domination and inequality. Historically, racial knowledge has stipulated and legitimated what we might describe as a kind of racial ontology, a set of assumptions, claims, and prescriptions about race and racial superiority/inferiority—e.g. the notion that “whites” or “the West” represent the apex of human civilization.

Drawing on diverse texts, this course explores of the emergence, evolution, and effects of racial knowledge. This exploration will begin by discussing the historical relationship between the modern concept of race and European colonialism and slavery. Subsequently, we will track several major developments in the history of racial knowledge, from Enlightenment naturalists to censuses to contemporary genomics research. In these travels we will pose and ponder on the following questions: How have diverse actors—e.g., scientists, state officials, and coders—made and mobilized racial knowledge? What institutional factors have shaped these processes and their consequences? Finally, what role can (or should?) racial knowledge play in addressing racial inequality and exclusion in the present?
COURSE SCHEDULE

* Means assignment due date or exam

Week One: Introduction and Intellectual Foundations (January 8 & 10)

Week Two: Early Racial Taxonomies (January 15 & 17*)

Week Three: Race, Census, and the State (January 22 & 24)

Week Four: Racial Pedagogy (January 29 & 31*)

Week Five: Social Science and Racial Knowledge in Europe (February 5 & 7*)
Guest Lecturer: Yannick Coenders
Week Six: DNA: Racial Identity and Embodiment (February 12 & 14*)


Week Seven: Data and the Racialization of Crime (February 19 & 21)


Week Eight: TBA (February 26 & 28)

Week Nine: Decolonizing Racial Knowledge? (March 5 & 7*)


Week Ten: Reading Period (March 12 & 14)

REQUIRED BOOKS


Books are available for purchase at the bookstore. Cheaper copies may be found online. Must purchase or borrow print version of assigned books. All assigned articles will be found on Canvas under “Files.” I recommend you print and bring a printed copy of assigned articles/chapters to class. For rationale, please see point below on “class preparation.”
GRADED ITEMS

In-Class participation (20%): Class participation will take various forms throughout the term, such as raising questions and making comments and actively engaging in small-group discussions/exercises.

Memos (30%): A key part of the course will be four short memos. These memos will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on course themes, as well as serve as prompts for in-class discussions. The memos should be between 400-500 words. Bring a printout (single-spaced) on the corresponding dates found below.

- **Personal Memo**: The first memo asks you to reflect on your knowledge about race. Here are some questions to consider: How have you learned about race in your life? What experiences do you think have shaped how you think about race? How have your understandings changed over time? What impact do you think your racial position and identity have had on your racial knowledge and ignorance? **Deadline: January 15.**

- **Racial Conceptualization Memo**: Interview a friend or family member about their knowledge of race. Drawing on Morning (2011), discuss their racial conceptualization. How does it differ from your own? Do they espouse a “social constructionist” view or an “essentialist” one? Do your findings match with that of Morning (2011)? **Deadline: January 31.**

- **Media Memo**: Search for and discuss a recent newspaper article on genetics, identity, and race. Questions to consider in your memo: How is the relationship between racial identity and DNA framed? What assumptions about race does the article make? How does the article relate to assigned readings on Week 6? **Deadline: February 14.**

- **Going Forward Memo**: Taking stock of the history and politics of knowledge examined in the course, what should we do with racial knowledge? What role should it have in our society? How might we build forms of racial knowledge that upend rather than legitimate racial domination? Or should we abandon the use of racial knowledge altogether? In writing up your memo, consider the readings for Week 9. **Deadline: March 7.**

Mid-Term (20%): The mid-term will be primarily composed short answer questions and definitions. It will cover materials from weeks 1-4. You may consult your notes during the exam. The mid-term will be administered in class on **Tuesday, February 5.**

Final Exam (30%): The final exam will be a cumulative exam, covering the entirety of the course. It will be composed primarily of short and long-answer questions. You may consult your notes during the exam. The final is scheduled for **Wednesday, March 20, 7-9pm.**
**MECHANICS**

**Class Preparation:** Come to class having read assigned readings and prepared to discuss. The use of laptops should be strictly for your notes or readings. I do, however, recommend you print out and bring hard copies of readings to class, if possible.

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend every session, barring documented emergency or recognized religious holiday. An attendance sheet will be circulated at the beginning of class. More than 3 absences will result in a drop in letter grade; more than 5 absences will result in an automatic failure.

**Deadlines and Makeups:** This course has strict assignment deadlines. Deadlines help ensure that students receive feedback in a reasonable amount of time (typically within one to two weeks). Unless there is a documented emergency, deadlines must be met. Similarly, only in cases of a documented emergency exam make-ups be granted. Early exam-taking will not be allowed.

**Intellectual honesty:** This course follows Northwestern’s code of academic conduct. As required, any incidents of plagiarism or academic misconduct will be immediately reported. Visit: [www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html).

**Accommodations:** I urge any students with disabilities or in need of accommodations to connect with Accessible NU. For more information visit: [www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/](http://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/). I also ask that students inform me as early as possible about their needs.

*Syllabus subject to change. Students will be alerted to any changes in advance.*