

Manfred Henningsen

hennings@hawaii.edu

Polisc. 271I  
11:45.

## Politics and Race

Spring 2015; TR 10:30-

Saunders 624

### 1) Description:

This course will explore the impact of the concept of race on politics in Western societies. We will focus on the U.S. as our major case study though always emphasizing that we are dealing with a syndrome that has been widespread within colonizing Western societies in general. We will start the class with the movie *Separate but Equal* (1991), which explores in an epic way the story of overcoming the constitutionally legitimated segregation of public schools that culminates in the Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. The 1954 decision overturned the Supreme Court decision from 1896 that established institutional segregation by declaring in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” arrangements were acceptable. We will discuss both decisions.

The concept of race emerged fully developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on both sides of the Atlantic when philosophers, natural scientists and political thinkers were responding to the perceived diversity of humankind and designed a basically skin color based hierarchy of human types with white people on the top and dark people at the bottom of the scale. This hierarchy of human types played, for example, a role in the justification of American slavery and the constitutionally ratified accounting scheme according to which African slaves were counted 3/5<sup>th</sup> of a white person and were therefore not equal.

Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the *Declaration of Independence* and third President of the U.S., developed in two chapters of his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) arguments that spelled out the essential differences of Whites and Blacks and the impossibility of their co-existence if slavery should ever be abolished. After Jefferson had published the book, he began living with his young slave Sally Hemings and thereby contradicting with this relationship his published views. Hemings, by the way, was already the child of a relationship between his father-in-law and one of his female slaves. Jefferson’s white wife Martha who died in 1782 was therefore actually the half-sister of Sally Hemings. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings lived in a common law relationship that lasted until his death in 1826 and produced a number of children. This White/Black relationship illustrates not only Jefferson’s honest dishonesty about the existential impossibility of integration. The controversy about this conjugal relationship of Jefferson with the black woman he owned and had children with played a role in his presidential campaign in 1801, though Jefferson never commented on it. It became highlighted again,

after almost 174 years of amnesia, in 1974 by a UCLA historian. We will discuss Jefferson's book, the Hemings story and the reasons for its dismissal by generations of American historians until DNA testing silenced the majority of the original deniers, but not all. We will also discuss the contemporary confrontation between the White and Black offspring of Jefferson that was aired in 2000 in the PBS documentary, *Jefferson's Blood*.

Jefferson's obvious disregard for his own ideological convictions regarding the impossibility of White-Black relations reflects a fundamental American schizophrenia about race. After all, even if miscegenation was not the rule in the ante-bellum South of the U.S., it was not the exception either. Hundreds of thousands of mixed race people in 1860 were testimony to this often violent reality. We will use the Jefferson story to explore American race relations from the Founding in the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the confrontation in the year 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City..

We will finish the class with the discussion of the most extreme race based regime of terror and mass-killing, namely Nazi Germany. We will focus on the trial of the organizer of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem in 1961 and the ongoing controversy that the book on the trial by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt has created. A German movie, *Hannah Arendt* (2013), presents a vivid portrayal of Arendt and makes us see the controversy in perspective. An earlier Israeli documentary on Eichmann (*The Specialist*) and his trial substantiates Arendt's arguments. Recently a German historian has critically sharpened our perspective on Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

In addition to the readings we will watch and discuss the following movies: *Guess Who is coming to Dinner?* (1967); *Separate but Equal* (1991), and *Hannah Arendt* (2013).

## 2) Requirements:

*Since this is a Writing-Intensive (W) class, students will have to write 4 papers (5 pages each). One of the 4 papers will be a movie review. For the other three papers the instructor will provide lists of topics that are connected with the required texts or topics that were discussed in class. The grades for the papers will form 60% of the final grade. The instructor will comment individually on the papers and discuss some of them with the students in class. In addition to the papers, students have to sign up for discussion groups and take a final class exam. The Final exam will be 30% and 10% will go to class participation.*

## 3) Required Texts:

*Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Penguin Classics;*

*David Walker, Appeal, Black Classic Press;*

*George Frederickson, Racism. A Short History, Princeton;*

*Paul Gilroy, Against Race, Belknap Press;*

*Supreme Court Decisions: Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857); Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Brown v. Board of Education (1954).*

#### 4) Calendar of Class:

1/13 *General introduction.*

1/15 *Movie: Separate but Equal.*

1/20 *Continuation of movie.*

1/22 *Discussion.*

1/27 *Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1789).*

1/29 *Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia.*

2/3 *Discussion.*

2/5 *Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Chapter 14: Laws.*

2/10 *Discussion.*

2/12 *Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Chapter XVIII: Manners.*

2/17 *Discussion.*

2/19 *David Walker's Appeal.*

2/24 *Walker's radical critique of Jefferson and of the slaves' lack of resistance.*

2/26 *Discussion of slavery.*

3/3 *The Sally Hemings story.*

3/5 *The role of American historians in the national denial of the Hemings story.*

3/10 *The historians' response to the DNA tests.*

3/17 *PBS-Documentary: Jefferson's Blood.*

3/19 *Continuation of the documentary.*

4/2 *Supreme Court Decision: Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857).*

4/7 *Supreme Court Decision: Plessy v. Ferguson (1896).*

4/9 Supreme Court Decision: *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

4/14 Movie: *Guess Who is Coming for Dinner?* (1967)

4/16 Continuation of movie.

4/23 The Holocaust as the extreme case of a race based regime of terror and mass-killing.

4/28 The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem 1961.

4/30 Movie: *Hannah Arendt* (2013).

5/5 Continuation of the movie.

5/7 Final discussion.

5/11-15 Examination period.