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Polisc. 271 I:

Politics and Race

Spring 2019

1) Description:

At the beginning of the class, I want to discuss the impact of the Obama presidency on the perception of race in the USA and why his successor, President Donald Trump, has been trying to erase that impact. Obama's eight years in office present a great opportunity to get into the subject matter of the course on Politics and Race. Ta-Nehesi Coates summed up the African-American attitude towards the Obama presidency with the title of a book he published in 2017: *We were Eight Years in Power*, though somehow neutralizing the emotional impact with the subtitle *An American Tragedy*. The first African-American President who is married to Michelle Obama, the Afro-American woman from Chicago, had avoided as much as possible making race a major issue of his presidency. Yet his upbringing in Hawai'i and the four childhood years in predominantly Muslim Indonesia provoked all kinds of polemical debates, including the racist 'birther' movement which helped to get Trump support in older, predominantly white constituencies that had disliked the idea of having a black president in the White House. Michelle Obama discusses in her just published memoirs, *Becoming*, the impact Trump's support of the birther movement had on the life of her family.

This course will explore the impact of the concept of race on politics in Western societies. We will focus on the U.S. and Nazi Germany as our major case studies. Yet we will always emphasize that we are dealing with a syndrome that has been widespread within Western but also other societies. 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 decisions *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. The decision overturned the Supreme Court decision from 1896 that established segregation by declaring in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" arrangements were acceptable. We will discuss the political impact of both decisions on American society.

Other movies and documentaries that illustrate the phenomenon of American racism will be *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) by Spike Lee. It's a feature movie that presents the real story of the first African-American policeman in Colorado Springs who infiltrates and exposes the Ku Klux Klan. This examination of race relations is as relevant today as it is in portraying a slice of life the 1970s. In the documentary *I'm not your Negro* (2016), the writer James Baldwin reflects on his life in the U.S. and his self-chosen exile in France and describes how racism engendered his writings. The movie *Hidden Figures* (2017) narrates the story of three black female mathematicians that began to work for NASA in the 1960s and had to overcome all kinds of barriers

The concept of race emerged fully developed in the late 18th 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 skinned people on the top and dark skinned 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 3/5th 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* 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 in London (1787), while staying in Paris as representative of the Confederate States (1785-89), 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 the half-sister of Sally Hemings. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings lived in a common law relationship that lasted until his death on the 4th of July 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 responded publicly. It became highlighted again, after almost 174 years of denial, in a book by the UCLA historian Fawn Brodie (1974). We will discuss Jefferson's views in his 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.

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 South of the U.S. before the Civil War (1861-65), it was not the exception either. According to the census of 1860 588,352 people of mixed race lived then in the U.S.A. and testified to this often violent reality. We will use the Jefferson story to explore American race relations from the Founding in the late 18th to the confrontations in recent years that were triggered by police violence against young black men.

In the second part of the class, we will discuss the most extreme race based regime of terror and mass-killing, namely Nazi Germany. We will start with a Swedish documentary, *The Architecture of Doom*, which presents and explores in vivid detail the various ideological strands that formed the foundations of the Nazi empire. We will watch two movies, which cover the attempt to bring justice to the record of terror. The movie *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) is an early Hollywood approach to this issue. 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, is the theme of the German movie, *Hannah Arendt* (2013). The movie presents a vivid portrayal of Arendt and makes us see the controversy in perspective.

2) Requirements:

Students have to write four papers, two papers dealing with movies covering American race issues and two papers responding to movies that deal with Nazi Germany. The grades for the papers will form the core 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, the instructor will use your participation in class discussions as an extra bonus to the grade. In addition, I want to talk individually with each student of the class.

3) Required Texts:

Chapters of Thomas Jefferson's book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, will be distributed on-line. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning. The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016). The texts of the Supreme Court Decisions (*Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857); *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) will be made available on line.

4) Calendar of Class:

1/8 General introduction.

1/10 Racism in contemporary America and Europe.

- 1/15 Movie: *BlackKklansman*.
- 1/17 Continuation of the movie and discussion.
Topics for the first paper.
- 1/22 Movie: *Separate but Equal*.
- 1/24 Continuation of the movie.
- 1/29 Discussion.
- 1/31 *Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1789)*.
- 2/5 Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Chapter 14: Laws and chapter 18: Manners.
- 2/7 The Sally Hemings story.
- 2/12 The Sally Hemings story and the role of American historians.
- 2/14 Movie: *I'm not your Negro*.
Topics for the second paper
- 2/19 Discussion
- 2/21 Movie: *Hidden Figures*.
- 2/26 Continuation of movie and discussion.
- 2/28 The Supreme Court Decisions: *Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)*; *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)*;
Brown v. Board of Education (1954).
- 3/5 Discussion of Supreme Court Decisions.
- 3/7 Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.
- 3/12 Documentary: *The Architecture of Doom*.
- 3/14 Continuation of documentary.
- 3/18 – 3/22: Spring Recess.
- 3/26 Movie: *Judgement at Nuremberg*.
- 2/28 Continuation of the movie.

Topics of the third paper.

4/2 Documentary: *The Architecture of Doom*.

4/4 Continuation of the documentary.

4/9 Discussion.

4/11 Movie: *Judgment at Nuremberg*.

4/16 Continuation of the movie.

Topics of the fourth paper

4/18 Discussion.

4/23 The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, 1961.

4/25 Movie: *Hannah Arendt* (2013).

4/30 Continuation of the movie.