Course Description

Who are we? How did we get here? Could we be different? And who is the ‘we’ here, anyway? Is there, in other words, such thing as “human nature”? These are the questions that animate the human sciences. They are a special, distinctively reflexive kind of inquiry: because they ask questions about ourselves, they also lead us to think differently about who we are—which in turns affects the science itself. Even at their most scientific, these questions are always freighted with social and political significance, as shown by ongoing debates about the biology of sex and race, human intelligence, nature versus nurture, genetic determinism, and more.

This five-week undergraduate seminar traces the arc of the human sciences since 1945, at the dawn of the era of ‘human rights,’ a time in which tracing the scientific contours of the human became politically urgent. By the early 1950s, the anchoring of human origins in the modern synthesis of genetics and evolutionary biology, and the announcement of the discovery of the structure of DNA, promised a new science that would finally get at the root of the human, while generating utopian aspirations for remaking us altogether. Both of these impulses—to understand and to transform—are still with us. Technologies like CRISPR-Cas9, transcranial magnetic stimulation, hormone therapy, and nanomedicine today promise to fundamentally remake our biology in the direction of
our choosing. How did we get here?

Divided by theme, each session in the course traces a different objects of the human sciences—e.g. sex, race, primates, blood, brains—as they became salient for researchers seeking to get at the root of the human species. We will draw together developments in fields like primatology, cognitive science, genomics, human biology, demography, psychiatry, and neuroscience as we seek to understand the stakes behind claims to human nature and dreams of reengineering or liberation. We will draw on a range of material, including primary sources, work by historians, and “flash forwards” to current events to develop a critical and informed view towards the various scientific messages about human beings that surround us today. We will also work on the skills necessary for historical research, particularly working with archival sources. Across themes, we will ask: Who gets to make authoritative knowledge about what it means to be human—and who doesn’t? How is scientific knowledge accepted or challenged? What are the social, political, economic and personal contexts in which these ideas are produced? What hopes and desires animate this work? How are the human sciences taken up, towards what ends?

Course Requirements

Participation (15%): This seminar meets twice a week for the full five week session. Attendance is mandatory, as it provides me with the opportunity to assess your understanding of the material and for you to earn your participation grade through participation in discussion and in-class activities. Absences, late arrivals, and early departure should be verified ahead of time.

Discussion Lead (10%): In our first class, everyone will choose one class session to be the discussion lead. Each discuss leader will prepare a 10-minute presentation that introduces the texts and authors, as well as the major themes, arguments, and connections. Each discussion lead will also prepare 2-3 discussion questions to pose to the group.

Reading Reflections (30%): 4 reflections, 1-2 pages each, due at the end of Weeks 1, 2, 3, and 4. We will discuss expectations for reading reflections in class, but the general aim is for you to engage with the readings in terms of argument, intervention, and evidence, and to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts between different texts.

Project Proposal + Bibliography (10%): Due date on Friday, July 21. A final project proposal (see below) will be due at the end of Week 3, in addition to a bibliography listing primary and secondary sources you intend to make us of. I will be meeting all of you individually in Weeks 3-4 to help shape and develop your project, and support you in any planning or research.

Final Project (35%): Due date on August 9. During Week 4 and 5 you will begin to develop a final project, between the following options: (1) a 10-12 page historical research paper, offering an analysis of a set of primary sources (such as, but not limited to, archival material available at Yale), and engaging with secondary sources; or (2) two imaginary Op-Ed essays, approximately 1000 words in length, engaging both with a contemporary issue in public life and the history of the human sciences; or (3) a 15-minute podcast examining a major theme or issue from the class, along with a written transcript. We will discuss expectations further in class.
Grading Summary

- Class Participation: 20%
- Discussion Lead: 10%
- Reading Reflections: 30%
- Final project proposal: 5%
- Final project bibliography: 5%
- Completed final project: 35%

Academic Integrity

We will be sharing ideas together throughout the course, but ultimately your work must be your own. Yale has strict rules around academic integrity: plagiarism, fabrication of research of sources, reuse of a paper for a course, and other forms of academic dishonesty, regardless of the student’s intent, are taken extremely seriously and punished accordingly; they also do you a disservice in that you don’t engage fully with what the course has to offer. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to get in touch.

Yale policies on academic integrity can be access on page 43 here: http://yalecollege.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/URegs_14-15.pdf
See also the Writing Center's helpful advice: https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism

Required Books

The following books are on reserve at Bass Library, lendable from Borrow Direct, and on sale at the Yale Bookstore. All other readings will be available on Canvas.


Michelle Murphy, The Economization of Life (Duke University Press, 2017)


WEEK 1

Note: assigned readings are subject to modification.
Monday, July 3: Introduction & Origins

*Mini-Lecture: Looping Effects of the Human Sciences & Evolutionary Biology and the “Modern Synthesis”*


Wednesday, July 5: Genes

*Mini-Lecture: Being Human After DNA & Sociobiology and its Critics*


M. Susan Lindee, “Human Genetics after the Bomb: Archives, Clinics, Proving Grounds and Board Rooms.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 55 (2016); 45-53.


*Flash forward:* Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What it Means for Modern Relationships* (2010), 1-16.

WEEK 2

Monday, July 10: Race

*Mini-Lecture: The Disappearance of Scientific Racism?*

*Primary source:* UNESCO, “Statement on Race” (1950) and “Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences” (1951)


Flash forwards:
- Open Letter, “How Not to Talk About Race and Genetics,” Buzzfeed, 30 March 2019
- Amy Harmon, “Why White Supremacists Are Chugging Milk (and Why Geneticists Are Alarmed),” New York Times, October 17, 2018

Wednesday, July 12: Blood

Mini-Lecture: Genetics, Indigeneity, and the Scientific Politics of Human Blood


WEEK 3

Monday, July 17: Population

Mini-Lecture: Spaceship Earth and the “Population Bomb”


Michelle Murphy, The Economization of Life (2017), intro and ch. 1-5.


Wednesday, July 19: Primates

Mini-Lecture: Why Think With Primates?
Primary source: clip from *Gorilla* (1981), *National Geographic Films*


**PAPER PROPOSAL + BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE BY EMAIL BY FRIDAY JULY 21**

**WEEK 4**

**Monday, July 24: Sex**

*Mini-Lecture: The Normal and the Pathological in Sex, Gender and Sexuality*


Sarah Richardson, “Chapter 1: Sex Itself.” *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (2013).


**Wednesday, July 26: Minds**

*Mini-Lecture: Governing Minds in the Cold War*


WEEK 5

Monday, July 31: Brains

Mini-Lecture: The Rise of the Neurosciences


Wednesday, August 2: Feelings

Mini-Lecture: Emotion Science, Neuropharmacology, and Mental Health


*Flash forward:* Danielle Carr, “Mental Health is Political,” *New York Times*, 20 September 2022

**FINAL PROJECT DUE BY EMAIL BY AUGUST 9**