The Moral Arc of America: Justice, Morals, and Power in U.S. History
Autumn 2020

This course examines pivotal issues and moments in U.S. history, where morals, justice and power took on heightened urgency, becoming focal points of public debate. With an eye to present-day concerns, the course will explore race and slavery; bodily autonomy; freedom of speech and assembly; and the market as a model in a democracy. We will study both the voices of actors in the past and influential historical writing, examining contending views, resolutions reached or not reached, tracing the play of debate in a range of sources, including speeches, stories, political debates, and legal cases.

Course Requirements:

I) Class discussion and presentations: 1) Thorough reading of assigned texts and thoughtful class participation; 2) An oral presentation examining one of the problems or themes addressed in the assigned readings. The presentation should run for about 10-15 minutes. It should sum up the main themes, arguments, the analytical framework, and evidence used. It should pose a question for class discussion. 3) Group presentation: Each group should find a text or set of texts related to a course theme and introduce them to the class, explain why they are important, and how they confirm or challenge views presented in the assigned readings for the week. The text(s) may be either be a scholarly article or a primary source (40%).

II) Written assignments: 1) A 4-page paper analyzing themes raised in selected readings, on a week of your choice, due by 3 pm on Wednesday before the class meeting and addressing texts assigned that week (20%); 2) A 10-12 page paper a due at the end of exam period analyzing an issue addressed in the course that you would like to learn more about by exploring and writing about some additional documents (40%).

Required Texts:

- Sean Wilentz, No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2018)


Books will be available from the Seminary Coop and the Gleacher Center Bookstore. All other texts will be on Canvas.
Week 1   9/30/2020 Introduction Justice and History: Moral Dilemmas of Representing the Past

- “Open Letter on the Proposed Destruction of a Mural Cycle,” Nonsite.org (editorial), no. 29, July 2, 2019
- Email from Amanda Woodward, Dean of the Division of Social Sciences, re Upcoming renovation work in the Social Science Research Building, July 31, 2020

Part I  PROBLEMS OF SLAVERY AND RACE

Week 2  10/7 Slavery and the American Project

Week 3  10/14  Was the United States Constitution a Proslavery Document?

- *Frederick Douglass*, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Independence Address at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.
- *State v Mann* (1829)


Week 4  10/21 Dissent and Resistance

- *State v Will* (1834)

Week 5  10/28  Who Freed the Slaves and What Did it Achieve?

- Selections from Berlin, ed., *Struggle Over the Meaning of Free Labor in the South*
PART II FREEDOM IN A FREE MARKET SOCIETY

Week 6  11/4 Amusement

- U.S. House of Representatives Debate on the Civil Rights Act (1874)
- United States Congress: Civil Rights Act of 1875
- Civil Rights Cases (1883), majority opinion and Justice Harlan’s dissent

Week 7  11/11 Who is a Person and a Citizen?

- *Yick Wo v Hopkins* (1886)

Recommended: Jeffrey Toobin, “Money Unlimited,” *New Yorker*, May 14, 2012

Week 8  11/18 Equality, Difference, and the Body

- Susan Glaspell, “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917)
- *Muller v. Oregon* (1908)
- *Adkins v. Children’s Hospital* (1923)
- *Buck v Bell* (1927)
No class 11/25 - Thanksgiving

Week 9 and 10 combined  12/2 Boundaries: Privacy, Property, and Speech

Reports on Projects

- *David Schenck v. United States* (1919)
- *Abrams v. United States* (1919)
- *Griswold v Connecticut* (1965)
- *Loving v. Virginia* (1967)