Contemporary Issues in Race
Project Topics

In this course, group will work together to connect the theories and concepts presented during the first third of the course to present-day social issues having to do with the racial groups we discuss in the course. You will be assigned to a group based on the topic that you are most interested in working with. You should choose your topic based on 1) how interested you are in the material, and 2) your schedule at the time of the semester that your group will be presenting (see course schedule for details.) You will rank your preferences from 1 - 5 using an online form during the first week of class. I will do my best to give you your top choice, but depending on demand, I may have to bump you to another topic. In the event that I need to bump students from their top choice because too many chose it, I will prioritize based on who filled the form out earliest, so it is in your best interest to submit your preferences as soon as you can.

1. Native Americans: Using Native People to Sell Sports, Products, and Ideas. Presentation Date:

Despite vocal protests from Native American groups, Native American people are still used as mascots to sell products, including sports franchises (think, for example, of the Washington Redskins or Cleveland Indians) and other consumer goods (for example, the Jeep “Cherokee” and “Crazy Horse” malt liquor). Native people are also often portrayed in limited and stereotypical ways in the media (films, including animated films, television, news media, etc.) This group will evaluate the use of Native American names and imagery in sport, marketing, and the media.

In particular, you will examine the presentation of Native people through the social institutions of Media, Business, and Sport. Here are some things to think about as you get started: 1) Native people as mascots: What are the arguments for and against using Native Americans as mascots? What major and/or local sports teams in the US continue to use Native Americans as mascots? What has been the backlash against these teams? Have any national or local teams successfully shifted away from using a Native American mascot? If so, how did this happen? 2) Native people and consumption of products and ideas: How are Native Americans presented in the sale of consumer goods and in the media? How does the presentation of Native Americans products help to reinforce popular tropes of Native Americans as either “noble,” “savage,” or “mystical”/rooted in nature? How are the presentations of Native Americans in sport and in consumer goods similar? Different? How have media representations of Native people helped to result in our current understanding of Native Americans as a “used-to-be” people?

Presentation Date:

Many recent cases have highlighted the disparities between whites and blacks in the US criminal justice system: Treyvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling are just a few recent, high-profile examples. Not only have these cases brought tensions about race to the surface, but they have highlighted racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

In particular, this group will discuss the role of race in the US criminal justice system. This is a broad topic, so you should be sure to focus your discussion. Things to consider as you get started: 1) Paint a picture of the problem. For example, within the U.S. criminal justice system, what are the racial disparities? Consider disparities in different types of crimes (for example, stop-and-frisk policies, drugs, etc) and in different points in the criminal justice system (for example, disparities in rates of arrest, conviction, sentencing disparities.) 2) Describe the consequences of the problem. For example, what does racial disparity in the criminal justice system mean for the ability of black convicted felons to find jobs? What proportion of young, black men is in prison, and what does this mean for the structure of the black family? Finally, 3) Beyond the criminal justice system, what role do other social institutions (such as education and the media) play in the ways in which we perceive white crime versus black crime?

3. Muslim Arabs in the Global West: The Intersection of Politics, Media and Daily Life. Presentation Date:

While pre-9/11 Islamophobia certainly existed in the US, post-9/11 discrimination against Muslims has risen dramatically. This group will discuss the challenges of being Muslim in the Global West (for example, in the United States and Canada as well as in European countries) and how the social institutions of Religion, Politics, and the Media may address and/or contribute to these challenges.

Through an examination of the treatment of Islam and Muslims in the media and in politics, you should consider the following: 1) Politics: how do politics (including political rhetoric and policy) influence how people are able to practice their faith (as just one example, investigate the debate around policies regarding the wearing of burqa or hijab in France)? How well represented are Muslims in politics, and why is this important? 2) Media: How is public opinion toward Muslims impacted by media - is there evidence to suggest that Muslims are portrayed according to social stereotypes? If so, discuss the stereotypes and provide examples of how they are furthered in the media. 3) Religion: how have non-extremist Islamic congregations and religious leaders dealt with the backlash against their faith? How have non-Muslim religious institutions addressed the issue of Islamophobia? 4) Discrimination: What are some examples of anti-Muslim activities (ranging from hate speech to hate crimes) in the West? Any local examples? Do instances of backlash against Muslims seem to be fueled by politicians and media (be sure to provide evidence)?
4. Latinos: Illegal Immigrant Children, the DREAM Act, and DACA.

Immigration is a contentious issue in the US. Many “push” and “pull” factors result in both legal and illegal immigration across the US-Mexico border. Those who enter the country illegally may bring with them small children and, increasingly many very young children are making the journey by themselves. When these children grow up – many thinking of themselves as Americans – they are surprised to realize the challenges they face. They are faced with deportation “back home” to a country they never knew.

In particular, this group will discuss the relationship of immigrants who came to this country illegally as children and how their lives intersect with the social institutions of Politics, Work, and Education. Things to consider: 1) Life pre- and post-immigration: What push factors lead people to leave Mexico and/or South America more generally? What is life like for them in their countries of origin? What is the immigration journey like? What are the risks in taking such a journey? What is life like for illegal immigrants once they reach the US (what kinds of jobs do they get? How do they get jobs without documentation of citizenship? Do illegal immigrants pay taxes? How easy is it for children who were brought here illegally to go to college?) 2) The politics of immigration: discuss the DREAM Act and DACA. What is the DREAM Act, and what would it allow for? What are the responses for and against it? What about DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)? What has this policy done, and what has been the response toward it? This is a difficult issue – what do you think the best answer is?

5. The Alt-Right in a post-Trump world.

Through an examination of politics and media (including social media), this group will examine hate groups and the “alt-right.” The alt-right movement has gained prominence since white nationalist Richard Spencer coined the term in 2008. Believing white interests are under attack from multiculturalism, adherents of the alt-right use the internet and support the Trump administration in an attempt to gain a following of conservative voters.

This group will examine the history of the rise of the “alt-right” and describe recent events that have thrust the alt-right into the forefront of a national discussion. Things to consider: 1) what is the alt-right? How did it come to be? What do they advocate? Is there a difference between the alt-right and hate groups such as the KKK (if so, what?) How do the terms “white nationalism,” “white supremacy,” and “white separatism” fit in with the alt-right’s ideologies and messages? Your goal is to provide a rich history and description of what the alt-right is. 2) Describe the visibility of the alt-right, such as rallies and marches, as well as responses to these things, including counter-demonstrations and institutional responses from media and politicians. In your opinion, how should individuals and institutions (media, politics, education) respond to the messages of the alt-right?