STPEC 191 C1
Social Thought & Political Economy (STPEC)
Fall 2015

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Email messages will be answered within 48 hours
Tuesdays 4 to 4:50 PM
Office Hours: Mondays from 1:30 to 2:30, or by appointment

First Year Seminar
American Nightmare: Police Killings and Incarceration in the United States
1 Credit

Course Overview and Structure

This seminar will examine the complex intersection of race, gender, sexuality, mental health, and class to understand the phenomenon of police shootings and high rates of incarceration in the United States. A final paper will allow students to pursue a related topic of their choice. Throughout the semester, students will work in groups and present on different topics connected with the theme of the course.

Course Objectives

. Become familiar with theories that seek to explain state sponsored violence
. Become familiar with cases of police violence
. Learn about incarceration rates in the US, across ethnicities and gender
. Become familiar with social sciences and social studies concepts that address major axes of oppression/resistance in society
. Develop critical thinking skills, especially concerning issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, racism, and class
. Develop the capacity to present in public and engage in academic discussion of complex topics
. Develop capacity to engage in critical reading and writing skills.

**Attendance Policy**

*Excused Absences:* If you will be forced to miss all or part of a class period due to a known conflict, please email the instructor in advance. If you are forced to miss a class due to an emergency (illness, family crisis, etc.), contact the instructor as soon as possible.

*Unexcused Absences:* You are allowed 1 unexcused absence. More than 1 unexcused absence will result in the loss of a letter grade in the participation portion of your final grade.

*Lateness:* Arriving to class late is disruptive to the instructor and to other students, and puts you at a disadvantage during the class. Unless you have cleared it with the instructor previously, when you are late for 2 classes it will count as an unexcused absence. Arriving to class more than 30 minutes late also counts as an absence.

**Different Abilities**

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), Learning Disabilities Support Services (LDSS), or Psychological Disabilities Services (PDS), please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements:

**Class Dynamics**

The content and format of this course will lead to a number of discussions about “hot topics” such as class, gender, and racial constructions. Students are expected to engage in these conversations sensitively and with openness to critique. If you feel you cannot speak in class, please talk with the instructor privately after class to figure out strategies that might help.

**Grading**
Attendance and Participation  35%
Group Oral Presentations   30%
Final Paper  35%

A  94-100   A-  93-90   B+  87-89   B  84-86   B-  80-83
C+  77-79   C  74-76   C-  68-73   D+64-67   D  60-63   F below 60

Attendance and Participation (35%): This includes thoughtful comments and questions during class time to support discussion, contribution to small groups, and attendance.  See above for attendance policy.

Groups Presentations (30%): Groups of students will present on different topics connected with class materials.

Final Paper (35%): The paper will address a topic related to the course, of interest to the student. By focusing on a question related to the course learnings, the student will develop a specific analysis of a concrete issue connected with incarceration and police shootings. 8-10 pages.

Technology Policy
This course does not require buying a book. Instead, it relies heavily on texts posted in Moodle. If you can annotate and underline texts online, you can bring your laptop to class for reference, but you cannot use the computer for any other task, except that of taking notes. Checking email, FB, Twitter, etc., will amount to being absent from the class and will be graded accordingly. Attendance and participation amount to 35% of your overall grade.

Please turn your cell phone off during class.

Academic Honesty
Academic dishonesty, in any form, will not be tolerated and you are responsible for educating yourself about the University’s official policy on academic honesty. You can read it in full at:
Course Calendar

Week 1
September 8- Syllabus hand-out, presentation of class, assessment of previous knowledges.


Watch at home video on Mass Incarceration: Why does the U.S jail so many people?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzxTaRkY6z4&feature=youtu.be

Week 2
September 15-Bodies, the state, and changes in discipline and power

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was an influential French philosopher. An important actor in May 68 in France, his critique of Soviet/Stalinist Marxism gave rise to a powerful methodology to understand the world by focusing on power and knowledge in Western societies. Rather than limiting his analysis to the economy, Foucault engaged in an exploration of how power produces knowledge and truth in different historical contexts. In this book, Foucault focuses on discipline and punishment in modern societies, tracing how these practices changed from Medieval Ages to our days.


Recommended: Foucaultian Important Terms. (In Moodle)

Week 3
September 22- Race, Sex, Gender, Nation, and Prison

Last class we looked at how discipline and punishment changed in modern times, in general, in Europe. Now we will assess constructions of power
and discipline in the early United States. What did the founding fathers have in mind when they envisioned manhood? How was criminal behavior viewed in a prosperous, seemingly egalitarian nation? What constructions of manhood were privileged when conceiving punishment in the new nation? What was the connection between sex, race, gender, the building of a new nation and the prison?


**Week 4**


What kinds of crimes land women in prison? What are the particular issues concerning women’s bodies behind bars? What happens to children when women are imprisoned?


And


**Week 5**

**October 6 - The New Jim Crow**

Having discussed general theory on incarceration (Foucault), and after taking a look at how discipline and punishment were conceived in the early U.S., we will now read modern texts that attempt to find a connection between racism and incarceration. “Michelle Alexander argues that the War
on Drugs and policies that deny convicted felons equal access to employment, housing, education, and public benefits create a permanent under caste based largely on race. As the United States celebrates the nation's "triumph over race" with the election of Barack Obama, the majority of young black men in major American cities are locked behind bars or have been labeled felons for life. Although Jim Crow laws have been wiped off the books, an astounding percentage of the African American community remains trapped in a subordinate status - much like their grandparents before them. In this incisive critique, former litigator-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander provocatively argues that we have not ended racial caste in America: we have simply redesigned it. Alexander shows that, by targeting black men and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of color blindness. The New Jim Crow challenges the civil rights community - and all of us - to place mass incarceration at the forefront of a new movement for racial justice in America.” (Excerpt from the book)


**Recommended:** View at home. Michelle Alexander at U. of Chicago

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH0EcN-SIn0

**Week 6**
**October 13- No class, Monday schedule**

**Week 7**
**October 20 - Prison and class**

How do poverty and racism impact the dreams and aspirations of youth of color in the U.S. today? What kind of subjectivities are created when young people cannot access the job market, cannot go to University and live in neighborhoods plagued with violence? How do youth of color express resistance to deeply ingrained racism and poverty?


Watch in class: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mn_yKqf-kOl&feature=youtu.be

Week 8
October 27- Prison and the “norm”

In March 2003 – three decades after Stonewall – police stormed the Power Plant, a private Detroit club frequented by African American LGBT people. Over 350 people were handcuffed. Some were hit in the head and back; others were slammed into walls while being verbally abused. Their supposed crime was later chalked up to a bizarre infraction: “loitering inside a building.” The event illuminated a long shadow of policing in America, where discrimination and prejudice are pervasive. (From the book’s website)


Week 9
November 3- Displaced and Imprisoned

Fleeing countries whose economies were ruined by US foreign policies, after overcoming great perils, immigrants arrive to the United States where many are imprisoned in private jails.


Required: Watch at home, Immigrants for Sale, 2012, 33 min
Week 10  
**November 10-Colonized, dispossessed and imprisoned**

Native American’s were massacred, robbed of their territories, colonized and abandoned by the U.S. government. Incarceration rates for Native Americans are high. How do native people fare in the white man’s prison?


Week 11  
**November 17-Alternative Views on Discipline and Punishment**

Can prison become a space for education, recognition, and social change? What motivates inmates to attend college classes? What is the role of graduates once free? And, is prison the best way to encourage change? What would a program not focused on imprisonment look like?


And

**Mandatory Reading:** Magnani, Laura, and Harmon L. Wray. 2006. Beyond Prisons: A New Interfaith Paradigm for Our Failed Prison System. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (Selection to be announced) (In Moodle)

Week 12  
**November 24- Bare Life or The Walking Dead**

How do the state and the media justify police violence and killings? What are the ideologies that uphold the mass killing of people of color at the hands of the state?

**Week 13**
**December 1 -Killed by the State**

Ethnicity and class underline the story of police killings in the U.S. What are the issues faced by communities of people of color? How does a social movement organize to stop the slaughtering of their people?

**Mandatory Readings**


And


And


And


**Week 14**
**December 8- Wrap up and conclusions**
Bibliography


