ENGL 556 A: CULTURAL STUDIES

BIOPower AND BIOPolitics

- Winter 2016

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Meeting Time: TTh 9:30am - 11:20am
Location: SMI 203E
SLN: 14174

Instructor: Alys Eve Weinbaum
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ADDITIONAL DETAILS:

In contemporary discussions about the shape, scope, and formation of power in the context of economic globalization and neoliberalism the idea of biopower, first developed by Michel Foucault in the 1970s, has gained primacy. This course explores the possibilities and pitfalls of biopower as a description and an analysis of power in the contemporary moment as well as its relevance to our understanding the deployment of power over “life itself” at several key points in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In particular it asks about how scholarship on slavery in the Americas and the long histories of colonialism and empire might challenge and require us to reshape the theory of biopower.

Over the course of the quarter we will construct a genealogy of the concept of biopower across a variety of philosophical and theoretical texts that directly engage Foucault’s formulations. We will also explore recent scholarship that implicitly supplements and/or “corrects” Foucault’s theory through engagement with questions of race, slavery, empire, colonialism, incarceration, sexuality, human reproduction, and the ascendance of knowledge about the human genome. In order to “test out” the theoretical insights we will be gathering and building upon, each student will produce (and possibly present) a conference length paper exploring the how ideas of biopower and biopolitics may be set to work in relationship to a range of cultural texts, contemporary events, and historical transformations.

The aim of the course is threefold: 1) to excavate a genealogy of the concept of biopower; 2) to explore the various ways in which this concept has been expanded by thinkers focused on racialized forms of governance that involve control over “life itself”; and, 3) to examine how biopower is useful in literary and cultural analysis. Since many students (regardless of period of focus or national frame) include theories of biopower on their exam “theory list,” the course is also aimed to help with construction of this list.

Authors to be considered: Foucault, Agamben, Arendt, Mbembe, Hardt and Negri, Haraway, Weheliye, Wynter, Spillers, Hartman, Dorothy Roberts, Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Grace Hong, and Rachel Lee.

GE Requirements:
Other Requirements Met: