HST 388B:

Disease and Public Health in American History

Description and Learning Goals

Disease has never been merely a biological phenomenon. Instead, all diseases—including COVID-19—are also social phenomena: in their origins, in their definition, in their spread, in their impacts, and in the responses they engender among different groups of people. The way we understand disease is shaped by culture, and, at the same time, epidemic disease often reshapes the society around it. This course aims to analyze the many ways that disease, medical theory, public health practice, and policy have shaped the American experience, with an emphasis on the late nineteenth through the early twenty-first centuries. We will consider how disease has been understood at different times; how disease has been employed as a metaphor in political rhetoric; how ideas about immunity and susceptibility have produced understandings of race, citizenship, and national belonging; how epidemic events have mobilized initiatives in public health and health activism; and how tropes of communicable disease have manifested in American popular culture. At the end of the quarter, we will consider how history helps us to understand some of the many issues surrounding COVID-19.

Learning goals for this course include (1) to develop a basic knowledge of the history of disease and public health in American history; (2) to understand how and why disease has been understood in certain ways at certain moments, and to recognize what the impacts of those understandings have been; (3) to refine discussion skills in a seminar/zoom setting; (4) to gain experience with the analysis of both primary and secondary historical sources; and (5) to learn how to prepare a historical research proposal.

Books and Readings

The following books are available for purchase at the University Bookstore and/or are available as an ebook through the UW libraries.


Biss, Eula. On Immunity: An Inoculation. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014. [Note: This title is not available as an UW Libraries ebook; you will have to purchase a copy.]
In addition, there will be several shorter required readings (articles and chapters) and videos available electronically via either the UW libraries or the course Canvas page. If you have any issues accessing the readings, please let me know right away.

Requirements

Participation: Active and engaged participation in discussions is one of the major requirements of the course. The quality of the course ultimately depends upon the efforts of everyone in the class. Because participation is so vital to making this course a success, participation will account for 25% of the course grade.

I recognize that you may need to miss one or more classes for personal reasons and that the pandemic places additional burdens on many of us. If you miss a class, you may prepare a 300-500 word response to the readings for that day as a make-up for the missed participation; you may do this one time. If you must miss additional classes, please contact me to discuss your situation.

Discussion Leader: Each member of the seminar will be responsible for leading off our discussion at one session during the quarter.

Reading Reflection: Students are required to write one reading reflection for 5 different class sessions (approximately one every other week). These posts can address any session except for 1/14, 1/19, 2/11. These reflections should be 75-200 words and should be submitted on Canvas prior to that day’s discussion.

Papers: There will be 3 paper assignments in this class. Paper #1 will be based on course readings. Paper #2 will be based on course readings and two to three additional (short) primary sources. Paper #3 will be a research proposal. Additional information about each of the papers will be provided. A penalty of 1/2 grade (0.5 grade point) will be assessed on papers not submitted on time. An additional penalty of 0.5 will be assessed the following week and each passing week.

Grading:

Participation (in-class discussions, writing assignments, group work): 25%

Discussion Lead: 5%

Reading Responses: 15%

Papers 1 and 2: 15% each

Research Proposal: 25%

A Note on Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct, and ultimately it devalues both the person who engages in it and the broader learning environment in this course and the university. True intellectual work requires the free, open, and honest exchange of ideas. It is my sincere hope that no
one in this course will be tempted to plagiarize any portion of their assignments. To avoid the possibility of that temptation, begin your assignments early; ask questions about anything you are unsure of; and ask for any kind of help that you need. In addition to the professor, there are several other sources of help for writing assignments available on campus.

The Committee on Academic Conduct in the College of Arts and Sciences has defined plagiarism in the following way: using another writer's words without proper citation; using another writer's ideas without proper citation; citing your source but reproducing the exact words of a printed source without quotation marks, or, borrowing the structure of another author's phrases or sentences without crediting the author from whom it came; borrowing all or part of another student's paper or using someone else's outline to write your own paper; using a paper writing "service" or having a friend write the paper for you.

The obligation to properly cite the work of others applies to internet, oral, and written sources. A good rule of thumb is: “The key to avoiding plagiarism is that you show clearly where your own thinking ends and someone else’s begin.” A great website that defines the problem and discusses how to avoid plagiarism can be found at https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/avoiding_plagiarism/index.html. If a student submits a paper in which significant portions have been plagiarized, the student’s submission will be forwarded to the Dean’s representative on Academic Misconduct. If plagiarism is confirmed, the paper will be treated as not completed; the student will receive a 0 for the paper.

**Learning Support and Accommodations**

Your experience in this class is important to me. If you have already established accommodations with Disability Resources for Students (DRS), please communicate your approved accommodations to me at your earliest convenience so we can discuss your needs in this course.

If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations (conditions include but not limited to; mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924 or uwdrs@uw.edu or disability.uw.edu. (Links to an external site.) DRS offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or temporary health conditions. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process between you, your instructor(s) and DRS. It is the policy and practice of the University of Washington to create inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law.

The UW also offers accommodations of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities in accordance with state law. The UW’s policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy (https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/) (Links to an external site.). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form (https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/) (Links to an external site.).”
Writing Resources

All of the writing centers below offer remote services. If you think you would like to make use of these resources, I advise making an appointment online as early as possible. (You can always cancel.)

- The History Writing Center is open to History majors, to students writing papers for History courses, and to Evening Degree students.
- The Odegaard Writing and Research Center (OWRC) offers 45 minute appointments on any writing assignment ranging from an academic essay to personal statements.
- The Center for Learning and Undergraduate Enrichment’s (CLUE) Writing Center has writing tutors available throughout the weekdays at various times.

Schedule of Classes and Assignments

Jan 5: Introduction

Jan 7: Framing Disease


Jan 12: Framing Disease: The McKeown Thesis


Jan 14: Colonization


Jan 19: Colonization-continued


Jan 21: Epidemics and Society: Cholera


Jan 25: Paper #1 Due @9:00 a.m.

Jan 26: Epidemics and Society-continued


Jan 28: The “New Public Health”

Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies*, Ch. 3, pp. 82-126.

Feb 2: Public Health and Stigmatization


Feb 4: Race and Racism in Medicine & Public Health

Dorothy Roberts, The Betsy Wood Knapp ’64 Lecture: “The Problem with Race-Based Medicine,” June 18, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYODZmiXgWg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYODZmiXgWg)

Feb 9: Race and Racism in Public Health: Tuskagee

Brandt, Allan. “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskagee Syphilis Experiment.” In Tuskagee’s Truths: Rethinking the Tuskagee Syphilis Study, 15-33.


Feb 11: Spanish Flu


Feb 16: Environments and Disease

Nash, Inescapable Ecologies, Ch. 4, 5, Conclusion, pp. 127-215.


Feb 18: Vaccination


[Start reading: Biss, Eula. On Immunity.]

Feb 23: Vaccination—continued


Feb 25: No Class

Feb 26: Paper #2 Due @5:00 p.m.

Mar 2: AIDS: Origin Stories


Mar 4: Public Health Activism


Recommended: France, David. How to Survive a Plague [film], 2012. [Available through UW libraries.]

Mar 9: COVID-19: Causes and Effects


Mar 11: No Class

Mar 16: Paper #3 Due @ 9:00 a.m.