COURSE DESCRIPTION

New genetic technologies, from cloning and stem cell research to the production of genetically modified foods and novel genetic therapies, are changing our political and legal landscape. They are transforming the meaning of life and the boundaries of the human, and thus also our ideas about politics. The seminar will analyze some of the political and social implications of new genetic knowledge and novel biotechnologies. We will treat the changes these bring about as an opportunity to discuss and revisit key political categories—citizenship, property, reproduction, sovereignty, etc.—which are directly affected by advances in the life sciences. Our readings will combine sociological and legal analysis of the new genetics with some classic and contemporary texts of political philosophy.

EVALUATION

Analytical Assignments (75%)

Students are expected to write 3 short analytical essays (3-4 pages single-space) during the course, and 1 research paper (around 8 pages) to be submitted by the last day of classes.

- The three short analytical essays will be responses to questions presented by the instructor; students must develop an argument related to the readings and discussions of the class.
- The topic for the final research paper is free. The essay must explore in some depth one or several themes addressed in class. It must include some original research—e.g., sources and materials beyond the course syllabus—and offer a reasoned and structured argument. The research paper is due the last week of classes (May 13), but a draft outline of the paper—including a working thesis, and tentative structure and some of the sources the student plans to use—must be submitted by May 1. Each short essay will represent 15% of the final grade. The research paper will account for 30%.

Attendance and Class Participation (25%)

This is a reading- and discussion-intensive class. Students are expected to attend all classes and be prepared to discuss the readings. Multiple absences or habitual lateness will lower your final grade. Regular, punctual, and active presence is absolutely essential.
*** Statement of Academic Integrity ***

Please review the College’s Statement of Intellectual Responsibility (http://www.amherst.edu/~deanfac/policies/sir.html), as well as the information on academic honesty and plagiarism (http://www.amherst.edu/~dos/plagiarism/index.html).

In writing the analytical assignments it is essential that you reference your sources and attribute quotes and ideas to their authors. If in doubt about the applicability of these norms, please ask.

AVAILABILITY OF READINGS

All the required readings will be made available through Library Reserve and (in some cases) Blackboard as well. Recommended readings will not be made available online – but most, if not all, of them are available through the regular Library catalogue. Students should contact the instructor if they run into difficulties obtaining any of these materials. No book purchases are required.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

1/30 Introduction & Organizational Meeting

2/1 Controlling Heredity (I): breeding/controlling organisms


2/6 Controlling Heredity (II): eugenics


2/8 Controlling Heredity (III): prenatal genetic testing and “designer babies”


A. Buchanan et al., Ch. 5 (“Why Not the Best?”), in From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 156-203.


2/13 Race and Contemporary Genetics


2/15 Biopower


Recommended: Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford University Press 1998).

2/20 Therapy or Enhancement? (I)


S. Gilman, Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery, Chapter 1 (“Judging by appearances”) and chapter 3 (“The racial nose”).


2/22 Therapy or Enhancement? (II)

Film: The Sound and the Fury


3/1 Therapy or Enhancement? (III): Our Neurochemical Selves [first short essay due]


3/6 The Political Economy of the Life Sciences: A Revolution?


3/8 Mapping Human Genomes (I)


Recommended:


3/13 Mapping Human Genomes (II)


3/15 Property (I): *Class cancelled*

3/20 – 3/22 SPRING RECESS

3/27 Property (II): Appropriating Genes and Organisms

John Locke, chapter 9 “On Property,” in *Second Treatise on Government* (1690)


4/3 The Politics of Cloning (II): Policy Responses

National Bioethics Advisory Commission, Chapter 4 (“Ethical Considerations”) of *Cloning Human Beings*, June 1997 ([http://www.georgetown.edu/research/nrcbl/nbac/pubs.html](http://www.georgetown.edu/research/nrcbl/nbac/pubs.html))


4/5 The Stem Cell Debate (I)


Recommended: Scott, Christopher Thomas, *Stem Cell Now: A Brief Introduction to the Coming Medical Revolution* (Plume, 2005).


Materials on California’s proposition & stem cell research as a political campaign issue.

4/12 “Gene therapy” and the perils of experimentation


4/17 Genetically Modified Foods (I): Controlling the Seed

4/19  Genetically Modified Foods (II): Resistance

Documentary film: *Harvest of Fear*


4/24  New Social Movements and Genetic Constituencies


4/26  Pharmacogenomics (I)  

[third short essay due]

R. Service, “Going From Genome to Pill” *Science* 24 June 2005 308: 1858-1860


5/1  Privacy and Surveillance in the DNA era  

[final paper outline due]


5/3  War and the new biological

M. Cooper, “Pre-empting Emergence: the Biological Turn in the War on Terror,” *Theory Culture Society* 23 (4), 2006: 113-135

5/8  Are we entering an era of Posthuman Politics?


5/10  Genetics & Contemporary Art -- Course Review  

[final paper due May 13]