

## Honors 2212: American Institutions

Section 1, T/TH, 2:00-3:20; BUC 212

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office hours Tuesdays, 12:30-1:30, and by appointment

"In short, one may say anything about the history of the world-- anything that might enter the most disordered imagination. The only thing one can't say is that it's rational. The very word sticks in one's throat." --Dostoevsky.

American political institutions were conceived to promote equality. What equality entirely meant to the rich and powerful white men--self-styled "natural aristocrats"--who led the American Revolution and wrote the Constitution, remains a difficult problem. As do the attitudes and American identities of the Native Americans and African Americans who mostly sided with the British during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Nor is it obvious why the "Founders" believed in equality in the first place, or why or even if a majority of poor and middling white men supported their leadership. Perhaps then (as now) it was often enough to be not black, not Indian, and not female to feel meaningfully equal and entitled. Certainly slavery of African Americans and genocide and ethnic cleansing of Native Americans only hardened and intensified over the eighty years after Independence. Neither the Civil War nor Reconstruction erased divides of race and gender, much less class. The rise of American world power in the twentieth century did see dramatic expansions of American civil rights to include women and ultimately nonwhites. Yet the meaning of equality and citizenship remains subject to sometimes violent debate and confrontation. And while civil rights may have legally expanded, with sometimes sweeping social consequences, human rights have not. Meaning that while all American citizens have the right to vote or trial by jury, none of them have the right to eat. Which matters, since the United States has by far the highest hunger rates in the industrialized world: in 2015, 12.7% of American households (15.8 million households) were food insecure; and 5.0% experienced very low food security (6.3 million households).

So one thing seems clear: equality has never meant the same things to all Americans. Perhaps it never will. How have

debates over equality shaped American history, and how does it stand with those debates today?

**Requirements:**

This course is in part a collaboration. This syllabus isn't a legal contract. Especially for the second half of the course, I'm more than open to tailoring or flat out changing assignments to fit your interests and concerns. The course will become more and more yours as we approach the present, which is more yours than mine, and which you may often see more clearly.

Each student will be involved in producing **five (5) "think pieces"** on the readings for a given week (if written, 2-4 pages each, longer is fine if the spirit moves you), and produce a **final project** (essentially a more substantial and realized think piece, perhaps equivalent to three or four weekly pieces). The think pieces need not be papers. They can be art, music, video, whatever; they can also be done in groups. Think pieces are **due on Tuesdays, by email before class starts, and cover the assignments for THAT week.** That is, you produce them before class discussion of the material. If your piece is a physical object of some sort, please bring it to class, but also be sure to send the professor pictures via email before class starts. Think pieces are meant to be serious engagements with both the course material and with your own responses to it. While the think pieces will not be graded one by one, slapdash work will not be accepted.

Students will each also take place in **one in-class debate.** These debates aren't anything too formal, just a pro vs. con discussions of an important equality topic for the day.

**The 5 think pieces,** evaluated as a whole for each student, **together count 1/2 of the final grade; class participation (including the debate) counts 1/4th; the final project counts 1/4th.** Take class participation seriously. Even when you are not involved in a think piece, you are still required to complete the weekly assignment and participate in discussion. Class participation will be tracked.

**Students with Disabilities:** The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in this class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building,

581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations.

**Accommodations for Course Content:** Some of the readings, lectures films, or presentations in this course may include material that may conflict with the core beliefs of some students. Please review the syllabus carefully; if you have a concern, please discuss it with the professor as soon as possible. For more information, consult the University of Utah's Accommodations Policy at: [www.admin.utah.edu/facdev/accommodations-policy.pdf](http://www.admin.utah.edu/facdev/accommodations-policy.pdf) (Links to an external site.)

**Learning Outcomes:** The objective of the American Institutions requirement is to ensure that students have at least a minimal basis for responsible citizenship. All students receiving a baccalaureate degree from a public college or university in the state of Utah are required to have an understanding of fundamentals of history and the principles and form of government and economic system of the United States. According to Utah State Code R470, An AI course in History will include comprehensive coverage of: American history from first European contact with indigenous peoples to the present. The establishment of the North American colonies, the Revolution, and the constitutional system established after independence. Changes over time in America's definition of citizenship, and the contested nature of the development of American participatory democracy and the laws and practices that empowered or restricted the citizenship of individuals on the basis of race, class, gender and sexuality. The processes and consequences of economic growth, industrialization, and development. The rise of the United States to world power.

**Daily Assignments:** Please note that there is no textbook and that there are no books to be purchased. All the assigned readings and videos are available online, either through electronic reserves (marked e-r below and accessible from the university's main portal once you sign in) or directly from websites given below or from the online library catalog.

Also note that there are questions on the assignments throughout the syllabus. These questions are only to help you absorb the material and prepare for class discussion. You are not required to produce written responses to the questions (though doing so privately to prepare for class discussion couldn't hurt). Nor are the questions meant as assignments for or guides to producing think pieces.

Most important, when completing the daily assignments, **remember that you are not helpless**. If you don't know much about a given topic or if you want more background, search online or email the professor.

**Tuesday, 8/22:** Introduction: no assignment.

**Thursday, 8/24:** Read the *Declaration of Independence* carefully; there are many copies online, for instance at: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

How could a smart rich man who owned slaves, like Thomas Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, the biggest, wealthiest and most important mainland American colony, have written this with a straight face? Seriously, see if you can come up with a believable answer. Don't worry--nobody else has either--but try.

**Then read Po Bronson, "The Power (and Peril) of Praising Your Kids," *New York Magazine*, February 12, 2007, at: <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/>.**

Does Dweck's work correspond to your time in school or at home? What are realistic alternatives to praising intelligence and ability? Think about the people who've taught you the most in your life. What strategies did they use?

**Music: Suicide, *Suicide* (first album).**

What does this album have to do with Jefferson or Dweck?

**Tuesday, 8/29:** Go to the Virtual Jamestown website and look at John White's 1585 original watercolors of Native Americans: <http://www.virtualjamestown.org/exist/cocoon/jamestown/fha/J1010>. Then compare those to the black and white etched versions published in England.

What do you make of White's watercolors? Critical or accepting? Are White's Indians fully human in his eyes? How different are they? Equal to the British? Does White Europeanize Indians, or do you think that his watercolors are faithful representations? How do the published etchings compare to the original watercolors and what does the comparison tell you?

**Google and watch the entire episode (not just the trailer) of the PBS documentary "We Shall Remain," episode 1, "After the Mayflower."**

Ask yourself how WSR differs from most history you've learned. What do you make of such an aggressive point of view? More important, think about what evidence the makers of WSR really have for their confident vision of what it was to be Wampanoag. How precisely did they figure it out? Are you convinced?

**Google and start reading a PDF of Melville's novella, *Benito Cereno*; do NOT read summaries or Cliff's Notes. If this novella starts out boring you to death, don't worry--it will pick up. *Cereno* is a knife up a sleeve, devious and deadly. Nothing is unintended. Ask yourself how the boring tone of the narrator is part of Melville's point.**

Music: Explore the Pokanoket tribe (Wampanoag nation) website and listen to the music (hit play on the home page), at: <http://pokanoket.us/>

**Thursday, 8/31: Finish *Cereno*.**

When did you figure out exactly what was going on in *Cereno*? If it took you a while, or if you never did, ask yourself why? What do you think Melville was saying about slavery, freedom, and race with this trick? For all our talk of diversity and respect, are Americans really less blind today?

**To see what I mean, research the term "cuckolding" as applied in pornography and as applied by the alt-right to the Obama presidency and the relationship of Obama to Hillary Clinton.**

**Then look over the summary of seventeenth-century Virginia laws pertaining to slavery at: <http://www.virtualjamestown.org/slavelink.html>. If you don't know much about the Jamestown settlement, the website is excellent. You'll notice that the laws change pretty dramatically by century's end--why?**

**Google middle passage, images, and see what you get. Then check out Jason Taylor's remarkable underwater sculpture installation: <http://www.underwatersculpture.com/sculptures/>.**

Compare and contrast the standard images to Taylor. Obviously both are outraged and antislavery. But Taylor's sculptures have a completely different feel. Why? Taylor says this work isn't

about the Middle Passage. Nobody buys that--why do you think he said it?

**Music:** "Ogundey," "Oh Dey Seo," "Go Down Moses," at: <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/winter02-03/music.cfm> (scroll to bottom of page, the article itself isn't bad).

**Tuesday, 9/5:** Read the Phillis Wheatley entry on Wikipedia. Then Google and read carefully these poems by Wheatley (or follow one of the links at the bottom of the Wikipedia entry): "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," "On being brought from Africa to America," and "Thoughts on the works of Providence." Google Phillis Wheatley, images.

Did Wheatley surprise you? Do you find her surprisingly moderate or surprisingly radical? Why was she so important in her day? Was she primarily religious? Primarily rational? How do images from her time portray her? Are more recent images different? How does she portray race? Slavery (it's in there in many disguised ways)?

**Next watch Kimberle Crenshaw, "On Intersectionality," at:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPLA>

What would Crenshaw make of Wheatley, do you think?

**Next, find a copy of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* online somewhere and skim through it, and then look through the middle school lesson plan developed by the NEH, at: <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/common-sense-rhetoric-popular-democracy>.**

How would you compare Paine to Wheatley? They actually had much in common--what precisely? Does Paine have anything at all in common with Crenshaw?

**Finally, how would you compare Paine's appeal to that of Bernie Sanders?** Think of it this way--both sound good, but what do you think happened when people tried to apply Paine's ideas and actually write state constitutions based on them? By the same token, why might Sanders's ideas be difficult to apply in practice?

**Thursday, 9/7:** Research Donald Trump's now infamous statements that "both sides" were to blame for the recent violence at the "Unite the Right" march in Charlottesville, Virginia.

How would you compare the rhetoric and ideas surrounding the violence in Charlottesville (the site of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello) to the most influential American statement of the eighteenth century on Native Americans, African Americans, race, and slavery, **Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, response to Wheatley and to charges of hypocrisy over slavery**, at:<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html>: part of Query 14 (Laws), pp. 264-270, all of Query 18 (Manners and Customs, it's only two pages) and SKIM Query 11 (Aborigines). If the UVA e-text doesn't work, find a free copy of *Notes* somewhere else.

Given what he seems to have thought about people of African descent, do you think that Jefferson's opposition to slavery was sincere? Or was it just a sop to European critics of the American Revolution who agreed with the great British writer Samuel Johnson's rhetorical question "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" Jefferson was anything but stupid. How do you think he justified his contradictions about slavery and race to himself? Why was he so much more positive about Native Americans than he was about Africans? What do you think African Americans at the time made of *Notes*?

**For one answer, read the Introduction to the most radical African American pamphlet of the nineteenth century, David Walker's *Appeal*. There are a bunch of free pdfs out there.**

**Music: Go to the hymn list at the bottom of this page about Isaac Watts, the leading musician of the First Great Awakening, at: <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/isaac-watts>. Click on the song titles that are links and you'll be able to listen to them as RealAudio or MP3. If you're interested, Jefferson's favorite musician was Corelli.**