on time

The new millennium is upon us, though the matter shouldn’t be taken too seriously. After all, the year 2001 for Christians is 1379 for Moslems, 5114 for Mayans, and 5762 for Jews. The new millennium starts on January 1 only because one fine day the senate of imperial Rome decided to end the tradition of celebrating the new year at the beginning of spring. The number of years in the Christian era is a matter of whim as well: another fine day the pope in Rome decided to assign a date to the birth of Jesus, even though nobody knows when he was born.

Time pays no attention to the borders we erect to fool ourselves into believing we control it.

--Eduardo Galeano, *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*, p. 333

on space

The equator did not cross the middle of the world map that we studied in school. More than half a century ago, German researcher Arno Peters understood what everyone had looked at but no one had seen: the emperor of geography had no clothes.

The map they taught us gives two-thirds of the world to the North and one-third to the South. Europe is shown as larger than Latin America, even though Latin America is actually twice the size of Europe. India appears smaller than Scandinavia, even though it’s three times as big. The United States and Canada fill more space on the map than Africa, when in reality they cover barely two-thirds as much territory.

The map lies. Traditional geography steals space just as the imperial economy steals wealth, official history steals memory, and formal culture steals the world.

--Galeano, p. 315

Required texts


Course objective and rationale

In *Turning Back*, Stephen Steinberg argues that in the last third of the nineteenth century—that is, in the generation following the end of the Civil War—the United States lost its last best chance to end racism. During that time, two curious technologies emerged, and they may offer clues into the nation’s racial politics. In 1874 barbed wire was patented. Invented as a tool for keeping out unwanted animals, it soon became a tool for keeping in unwanted humans. A mere quarter-century after the patenting of barbed wire, concentration camps were invented in Africa.

As for the second technology: in 1884 a group of institutional leaders convened in Washington, DC, for the International Meridian Conference. They established the Greenwich meridian as the standard for timekeeping. Among the staunchest advocates for standardization was the railroad industry.

What can these very different technologies tell us about racism’s survival and persistence? The Industrial Revolution introduced technologies that, like these, escalated owners’ capacity to monitor and regulate workers’ bodies and movements—their time and space. Though Einstein would, early in the twentieth century, introduce
theories that would liberate time and space from the fixity and absoluteness into which Newton had locked them, still, ironically, new technologies were shackling workers by newly regulating them.

But what does this tell us about racism? And is its lesson applicable internationally?

This course will examine a range of aspects of the politics of time and space. I want to make clear at the outset, however, that the connection of these politics to racism will not always be immediately apparent. Only one of our six required books—Smith’s *Mastered by the Clock*—directly connects such politics to racism. Doane’s book is more typical, discovering a politics in film technology’s transforming our sense of time. Monmonier’s book clarifies distortions in mapmaking and map reading. Netz’s is an intellectual history of the abuses that barbed wire has made possible. Harvey’s and Lefebvre’s are theoretical considerations of the production and manipulation of space in expressions of power. None of these books, except in an occasional passage, directly links its subject to racism. Quite possibly, then, some of our discussions will pass through long stretches in which we say nothing directly about racism.

And yet “racism” is the first word in our course title, and I hope that all our discussions will eventually, in one way or another, circle back to it. Like Einstein’s time and space, racism is not fixed, static, and unchanging. It adapts to the changing needs of institutional power. Here is a recent and obvious example: back in the 1960s we struggled for representation, for a “place at the table.” Today, however, the Bush administration boasts, rightly, that it is the most “diverse” presidential administration in the history of the United States. Yet this phenomenon that Angela Davis calls “black faces in high places” has not silenced charges that Bush is also the most racist-imperialist president in the nation’s history. Co-opting the language of “diversity” and the demands for representation, Bush has even made these “black faces in high places” a necessary and indispensable component of his racist-imperialism.

Language is a key site of struggle. The uses to which technologies are applied—sometimes even the very names of these technologies—often cloak racist-imperialist agendas. But even the work of resistance and revolution bogs down in occasional linguistic morasses. For example, are “public time” and “public space” good or bad? For many observers, especially those who work in social sciences, they are sites of exploitation or oppression. For others, they are sites of resistance. Let me quote at length from an essay by Henry Giroux:

> At the core of Bush’s notion of community and hyperpatriotism is a notion of temporality that detaches itself from a sense of public deliberation, critical citizenship, and civic engagement. Jerome Binde refers to this view of temporality as “emergency time” and describes it as a “world governed by short-term efficacy,” which under the imperatives of utter necessity and pragmatism, eschews long-term appraisals, and gives precedence to the “logic of ‘just in time’ at the expense of any forward-looking deliberation. . . . Against this notion of emergency time, educators, cultural workers, and others need to posit a notion of public time. According to democratic theorist Cornelius Castoriadis, public time represents “the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities.” For Castoriadis, public time puts into question established institutions and dominant authority. Rather than maintaining a passive attitude toward power, public time demands and encourages forms of political agency based on a passion for self-governing, actions informed by critical judgment, and a commitment to linking social responsibility and social transformation. Public time legitimates those pedagogical practices that provide the basis for a culture of questioning, one that provides the knowledge, skills, and social practices that encourage an opportunity for resistance, a space of translation, and a proliferation of discourses. Public time unsettles common sense and disturbs authority. . . . [P]ublic time affirms a politics without guarantees and a notion of the social that is open and contingent. Public time provides a conception of democracy that is never complete and determinate and [is] constantly open to different understandings of the contingency of its decisions, mechanisms of exclusions, and operations of power. At its best, public time renders governmental power explicit, and in doing so it rejects the language of religious rituals and the abrogation of the conditions necessary for the assumption of basic freedoms and rights. Moreover, public time considers civic education the basis, if not essential dimension, of justice because it provides individuals with the skills, knowledge, and passions to talk back to power while simultaneously emphasizing both the necessity to question that accompanies viable forms of political agency and the assumption of public responsibility through active participation.

(from the Foreword to *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*. Eds. Saltman and Gabbard. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. xii, xiii.)
Still, the indeterminacy of such terms as “public time” can usefully remind us to define our own visions of justice. Indeterminacy itself should not, however, be a guiding principle. Just because our visions of justice may differ in their particulars does not mean that our commitment to eradicating injustice should bog down in quarrels over pluralisms and “diversities.” Racism is not negotiable.

Course description
Since we meet only once a week, it will be doubly important to keep up with readings. Our reading load will be heavy at times, though considerably lighter than in most graduate courses in English! Some of our texts—Monmonier, for example—will be easy and extremely accessible. Others—Harvey and Lefebvre and parts of Doane—will be slower going. You would be wise, therefore, to peek ahead, to get a sense of the texts’ difficulties, so that you might allow sufficient time for readings.

I regard this as, in the best sense, an experimental course. Because so few books and articles directly link technologies of time and space to racism, we will break new ground, theoretically and practically. Share your ideas, observations, intuitions, suspicions, speculations, and inspirations. No one can claim to be an expert in the work we will undertake this term. I will share my own ideas and observations, but I hope that these will provoke discussion. I envision this course as being staunchly anti-authoritarian.

You will write two papers for the course, one short and one article-length. Details of the assignments appear below. We will watch several films, and several guest speakers will share their knowledge and observations on various topics. I will create an e-mail list for the class, which I hope we can use to share ideas and questions. (You will not, however, be required to post to the list.) I have also created a coursepack with several short readings, and you should pick this up when it becomes available.

Requirements
Attendance and participation: Since we meet only once a week, these are expected.

Text presentation: At the beginning of the term you will sign up to lead a discussion of one of our texts during the semester. This presentation involves your briefly summarizing what you regard as the text’s most interesting or most important points and asking two or three questions based on the text.

Paper presentations: You will discuss both the short paper and the final paper. For the short paper, you need only to identify and briefly summarize the text you have reviewed, and then briefly discuss your critique. For the final paper, prepare to speak for roughly ten minutes, identifying your subject and your argument, then providing a few key details of your argument.

Short paper: Your short paper will review a text that you will select from the list of Recommended Readings below. Obviously this list only hints at a vast number of possible books and articles, and so you should feel free to discuss with me any other book that covers material relevant to our course. Obviously some of the books in the list are lengthy, and so we can negotiate your covering only a significant portion of a lengthy text. As with most reviews, you should provide a brief overview and analysis of the text. What does it tell us—or what can it tell us—about racism? Limit your review to roughly five pages.

Final paper: Your final paper should be an article-length (ie, fifteen- to twenty-page) analysis of an aspect of the technologies of time and space as they facilitate or resist racism. I encourage you to cross disciplines as you write this paper. For example, if your previous work is in the fields of women’s studies, ethnic studies, literature, or history, you may want to read Michio Kaku’s critical biography of Einstein and write about the political implications, especially for policies affecting communities of color, of his theories of relativity. Or, after reading Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, you may want to propose your own theory of the production of time.

Alternative to final paper: Since our course is concerned with technologies, you may propose an alternative to the final paper that uses a technology—probably a media technology—that will advance an argument or observation on the materials we will cover. Let me know as soon as possible that you are considering this alternative project.

Note: We will have no quizzes or examinations.

Grading formula
Attendance and participation, 15 percent; text presentation and short-paper presentation, 10 percent (5 percent each); final project presentation, 10 percent; short paper, 20 percent; and final paper, 45 percent.

Policies
I will refrain from rehashing the standard (and obligatory) proscriptions against plagiarizing, aside from saying that you should not plagiarize. I will note, however, that universities’ descriptions and warnings resemble our own
analyses of colonization. Administrators say nothing about imperialism and colonization—after all, as recently as the 1980s, many universities drew income from investments in apartheid South Africa—and so their condemnations of plagiarism are as close as they will ever come to our condemnations of colonization.

While obviously we should avoid abusive and hateful speech, I also want to encourage you to exercise your academic freedoms in thoughtful, intellectually honest discourse. A racist idea is a racist idea, and we should be honest enough to say so.

Official university statement on special accommodations
Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a documented disability. Please notify the instructor during the first week of class of any accommodations needed for the course. Late notification may cause the requested accommodations to be unavailable. All accommodations must be approved through the Disability Resource Center (DRC) in Administration Annex 206, 335-3417.

Schedule of assignments
Note: Because the bookstore did not place orders for our texts until one week before our first meeting, and because the copy center would not guarantee that our coursepack would be ready in time for our first meeting, and finally because other contingencies may dictate other adjustments, our schedule of assignments is extremely flexible and subject to change. Please keep up with any changes. I will post changes to the e-mail list.

8/24: Introduction and syllabus.

   Coursepack: Horton, “Time and Cool People.”
   Henry, “White People’s Time, Colored People’s Time.”
   Holt, “Fencing the Sky.”
   Web readings: Thompson, E. P. “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” Accessible at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-2746%28196712%290%3A38%3C56%3ATWAIC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>


9/14: Smith: Introduction and Chapters 2-4.
   Coursepack: Gould.

9/21: Smith: Chapters 5 and 6, and Epilogue.
   Monmonier: Chapters 1 and 2; pp 32-42; Chapters 6-8; pp 130-38; Chapters 10, 12, and 13.

9/28: Lefebvre: Chapters 1 and 2.
   Coursepack: Black.

10/5: Lefebvre: Chapters 3 and 4.
   Coursepack: Roediger (both essays).

10/12: Lefebvre: Chapters 5 and 6.
   Coursepack: Fallows (New York Times article).

10/19: Lefebvre: Chapter 7.
   Web reading: Smith, Thomas C. “Peasant Time and Factory Time in Japan.” Accessible at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-2746%28198605%290%3A3111%3C165%3APTAFTI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K>
10/26: Lefebvre: Afterword by David Harvey.
Coursepack: Foucault.

11/2: NO CLASS.

11/9: Harvey: All of Part III.
SHORT PAPER DUE.
SHORT PAPER PRESENTATIONS.

11/16: Harvey: All of Part IV.
Doane: Chapter 1.

11/30: Doane: Chapters 4-6.
Coursepack: Ricoeur.
Cardinale (Buffalo News article).
Downing (New York Times article).
Warm Water.

FINAL PAPER PRESENTATIONS.

12/7: Coursepack: Harlow.
Césaire.

FINAL PAPER PRESENTATIONS.

12/9 (Friday): FINAL PAPER DUE BY 4:00 PM EITHER IN MY MAILBOX OR IN MY OFFICE.

Recommended readings
Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2002.


---Some VERY preliminary notes toward time/space/racism (7 May 2005)---

After poring through a bunch of books in physics, horology, and geography, and a few in other areas, I’ve stumbled upon Michio Kaku’s fairly general *Einstein’s Cosmos: How Albert Einstein’s Vision Transformed Our Understanding of Space and Time*, an entry in a series of well-meaning books of science-for-the-common-reader, mostly written by novelists such as David Foster Wallace and Rebecca Goldstein trying to prove that they can really use both sides of their brains after all, but Kaku is himself a scientist, and this book is much better than most such books, especially among the dozens coming out this year for the centennial of relativity.

Some notes inspired mostly but not exclusively by Kaku:

**--absolute vs relative:** Newton argued for absolute Time and Space, Einstein for relative TS, based on his discovery that they contract. This new argument for relativity, however, is based on a concept of a much larger *scale*. For Newton, clocks and meter sticks provided definitive measures of TS. Einstein discovered that, if he boarded a streetcar just below a clock tower and watched the clockface as the streetcar raced away at the speed of light, he would see not only that the clock would appear to stop but also that his own watch would continue to keep time “normally,” and would differ with the clock. TS are therefore mutual functions of each other.

**--SCALE:** Einstein could make this discovery only after adopting a different, much larger frame of reference: the speed of light. Whereas for Newton, the clock and the meter stick were definitive, now the speed of light became definitive. Obviously the speed of light changed the *scale* of measurements, so that the frame of reference for all physical measurement would now be the backdrop of the entire universe. But while this theory of relativity applies to time and space—recognizing only that they exist as interchangeable, as malleable, and as functions of each other—it does *not* eliminate all absolutes. After all, the new absolute—deriving from the newer, larger scale—is the speed of light.

Quantum physics merely reinforced the importance of scale.

**--STATE:** If, as Einstein argues, mass and energy are interchangeable—Kaku writes that “the mass of an object increased the faster it moved,” and that a “few teaspoons of matter . . . has the energy of several hydrogen bombs”—then it becomes important to know the *state* of an object in any given context. Also, if “space turns into time and vice versa the faster you move,” then our knowledge of this *state* of an object must also include a knowledge of its
possible alternate states and contexts. Kaku even writes: “Space and time were now to be viewed as different states of the same object.”

**--tentative proposals:** While it might be argued that new technologies have always been quick to adapt new science, it seems to me that the period from roughly 1870 to 1940 was especially quick to learn to profit from the newly scientized technologies. And these new technologies enabled and financed new racisms and new imperialisms. What is so remarkable about barbed wire, for example, is not only its quick growth (and profitability) but also its rapid conversion to the politics of concentration camps. Similarly, film technologies were rapidly adopted for criminal investigations and racial profiling as well as for Taylorism.

Kaku doesn’t stress these in his study of Einstein, but it seems to me that two key principles of the new physics are Scale and State. If new science drove new technologies, and if new technologies drove new racisms and new imperialisms, then sooner or later the governing elites would recognize the significance of these principles.

An understanding of modern and contemporary racisms and imperialisms would therefore benefit from an understanding of the ways in which ruling elites gain and secure power through new technologies’ capacities to manipulate Scale and State.

Similarly, a revolutionary politics must counter with a stabler (though still flexible) Scale and State.

Below are some very crude beginnings toward reading oppression and revolution through these principles:

**--RACISM:** At last year’s ASA session on the current state of Ethnic Studies, Jose Aranda charged that ES departments have failed to anticipate, much less counter, the Right’s strategy of constructing role models in “heroes” of color such as Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Alberto Gonzales, Elaine Chao, etc. These “heroes” have bootstrapped their way to power and prestige, giving an almost literal appearance of a much larger showcase of options available to “former” victims of racism. The Right has therefore turned the tables on anti-racist discourse and practice. They have expanded the scale of the discourse of Race but have also contracted the scale of the discourse of Racism. To the Right, Race looks expansive and inclusive, while Racism looks shrunked to the size of a few impotent whiners chanting slogans from the 1960s. The irony is that, unlike Einstein, whose sense of scale still depends on the largest possible backdrop (ie, the speed of light) as an absolute frame of reference, the Right imposes particles of absolutes, each dedicated to particular aspects of existence (eg, gay marriage). It is as if the Right has constructed a descending spiral staircase of mirrors, each new mirror smaller than the mirror above it, and each reflecting therefore only a small—and diminishing—portion of the mirror above. At the bottom is the smallest possible mirror, reflecting the narrowest possible worldview.

**--IMPERIALISM AND POVERTY:** Media critics such as Bob McChesney rightly charge that the content of news reporting has become jingoistic, narrow, submissive to the interests of corporate elites. But any complaint about content must also acknowledge the illusion of choice provided by the abundance of media providers. The fact that thousands of providers are owned by only a half-dozen companies still doesn’t diminish the illusion of choice or the multitude of talking (and writing) heads. Propaganda becomes easier to sell to its audience. War splits two ways. In rich nations, it reduces, more than ever, to the discourse of the ruling elite, whereas in poor nations (where battles are waged or refugees are kept), it remains mostly in the blood and hunger of victims. A terrorist strike violates the discursive sanctity of the US by threatening to spill blood on a teleprompter. It challenges, literally, the State of the nation. Though “welfare reform” aspires to eliminate welfare but not poverty, it is celebrated as if it really had eliminated both. Democracy in Iraq is defined by Washington DC, but democracy in Lebanon goes undefined, just because George W Bush chooses to leave it undefined. The absence of counternarratives reflects the extent to which the powerful have secured control over the State of contested sites.

Though the State of any subject political/social body is (and should be) changeable, power is secured only when that body’s State is characterized as fixed, constant, immutable. Removed from history, that subject body is also removed from time, and the space it occupies is also tightly circumscribed.

**--revolutionary counternarratives:** New physics seems unassailable not because it rejects absolutes in the name of relativity nor because it rejects stabilities in the name of energy fluxes but because the absolutes it adopts exist on the largest imaginable scale: an inviolable speed of light and the Everything that cosmologists are trying to theorize. New physics is therefore not at all postmodernist—or is postmodernist on only the fragmented and relativized scale that is the only scale on which postmodernism can exist.

Since the age of the commodification and militarization of new physics, the Left has played catch-up. If Jose Aranda rightly accuses Ethnic Studies of failing even to anticipate the emergence of a class of racialized role models, then the Left still hasn’t constructed a politics that sensibly addresses the atomic bomb. The post-1945
no-nukes and peace movements are reactionary rather than preemptively visionary and revolutionary. Remember the claim that after the Holocaust poetry becomes impossible? Faced with a newly massive scale of oppressions, the Left responds with micro-scaled movements and theories. The poet’s proper response to the Holocaust should be not to stop writing but to write on a larger scale. (Of course even small acts of resistance can exist on this larger scale: eg, “colored people’s time.”)

E. San Juan Jr argues that we need grand narratives of revolution. Yet most folks on the Left blush and wince at the idea of revolution, as if they have just been photographed picking their noses. Culturalist criticism—eg, let’s study material culture as if it has no history and no economic implications—exists on a micro-scale that is unthreatening to power. Grand narratives of revolution, however, exist on the scale of the Everything that absorbs cosmologists.

Of course on some level, at some point in the future, a revolutionary scale achieves a transformed state. To propose a flimsy analogy: Social justice is to the revolution what the speed of light is to new physics—it is an inviolable absolute, or at the very least a necessary frame of reference.

--ANYWAY: These are just rough ideas, floating through my attempt to understand the politics of power in the last 130 or so years and trying to discover a key toward revolution. It seems to me that Scale and State are useful concepts toward both goals.