

“Position Paper”
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- I. **The logistical challenges of teaching a course on the medieval Mediterranean:**
 - a. given that few of us were trained to do it all, we inevitably find ourselves teaching “out of field.” How do we manage that?
 - b. given that there is so much material and so little time to present it, how do we condense it in ways that still give our students a meaningful sense of the whole?

I was trained as an Islamicist, but I have always been at the margins of different fields, Islamic history and early modern Iberian history. Given the cross disciplinary nature of my work, I have found in Mediterranean studies the ideal outlet to think about and present my research. Translating that to the classroom, however, is a different matter. One of the challenges of teaching the medieval and early modern Mediterranean to undergraduates is that it requires students’ prior knowledge, especially in Islamic history, but also in the history of Latin Christendom (not to mention Byzantine history, African history, etc...). Therefore, the first few weeks of the course has to be dedicated to providing an overview late antiquity (both in the eastern and western Mediterranean), as well as the rise of Islam and the Islamic conquests, and the basics of history of Latin Christendom. This takes up several weeks of the semester, but I think it is crucial.

Once the background has been established, one of the ways I present the material for students in an engaging manner is by organizing the material thematically in such a way that it highlights the interactions between different religious groups, for example through trade, travel, the development of philosophy, literature, captivity and slavery, diplomacy, mysticism, etc...

- II. **The revisionism inherent in such a course may be lost of students who come with comparatively little previous exposure to the subject.**
 - a. is it important that our students understand how medieval studies used to operate before it redefined itself as a Mediterranean field?
 - b. do we need to teach some of the canon so that we can teach against it?

I suppose I addressed this question above (at least partly), but in my teaching about early Islamic history and medieval European history I bring in historiographical debates that students are likely unaware of. For instance, because many of my students are Muslim, I take the opportunity to present perspectives on the rise of Islam that they may not have been exposed to, for example the ecumenical nature of the early Islamic community in Fred Donner's idea of the "early believers' movement." I also assign Pirenne, which allows us to revisit and challenge his theory throughout the semester by focusing on specific historical examples. The importance of challenging deep-seated notions of civilizational conflict notwithstanding, I am very much aware of the imperative of presenting the material in such a way that does not reproducing another distorted picture of the Mediterranean as a space of idyllic *Convivencia*.

For the early modern period Braudel continues to present myriad opportunities for discussion. While I have used it in the past with caution because of the difficulty of the text, it presents opportunities to challenge the Europeanist bend inherent in early Mediterranean studies. In my courses the Mamluks, Ottomans and Sa'dis occupy as important a role as any early modern Christian European state.

Periodization is also a matter to consider when teaching Mediterranean History. For example, should we continue to use "Medieval" to talk about the Mediterranean? Should we use other language, for example Marshall Hodgson's "Middle Period" of Islamic History to refer to the period from approximately 1000-1500?

- III. How should instructors navigate the "presentist" concerns that such a course is likely to inspire in its students, given its increased attention to ethnic/religious relations, colonialism, etc.?**
- a. how do we productively address these concerns without succumbing to anachronism or teleology?
 - b. is the a course on the medieval Mediterranean and less of a "civics lesson" than the traditional course on medieval Europe?

I would like to address this question by discussing a course I am currently teaching titled: “Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in the Pre-Modern Mediterranean.” My interest in teaching this course is multifold: 1) to engage recent scholarly debates in critical race studies in the premodern world; 2) to examine the development of ideas of race and ethnicity in the premodern Mediterranean by focusing on the construction and deployment of discourses of racialization and religious difference in processes of imperial formation and political consolidation during the early modern period. While engaging with recent scholarship on race in the pre-modern world, I am careful not to present the subject as a given, so the question of can we talk about race in the pre-modern Mediterranean is always at the center; 3) to invite students to consider their own ideas and attitudes about race and ethnicity, and how the construction and deployment of these categories play out in modern political and social discourses and practices.

The first weeks are dedicated to a discussion of language. At the very beginning of the semester students begin to question their own ideas of race. I assign the work of sociologists, legal scholars, and historians like Barbara Fields to set a common language, and to establish the basics: race is a social construct (most students come to the classroom with an understanding of race as a biological fact). We also take this opportunity to discuss what drives processes of racialization and racecraft. We then focus on the Antiquity and the middle ages by engaging with recent scholarship on race in the pre-modern world. This gives us an opportunity to discuss the ways in which working on (and studying) race in the pre-modern world can be a political act. Throughout the course we move between the past and the present, and the ways in which the past (especially the medieval past) has been deployed today to bolster extremist political ideologies. The rest of the course is dedicated to case studies or specific groups (Jews, Muslims, Roma, Black Africans, etc...) that allow us to test the question of whether or not it is possible to study race, and in what ways we can and should be studied.

I find this a particularly important course to teach at my institution, Rutgers-Newark, given the diversity of our student body. While we boast of one of the most diverse of US campuses, our student body tends to be siloed in their own ethnic and religious communities. A course like mine challenges students to think about the past in ways that they normally don't, and it also forces them to think about the present, and how they re-create their communities on campus. Finally, I would like to move beyond the questions of anachronism and teleology, to consider issue of activism in scholarship and in teaching. I think this is a matter that many of us are forced to grapple with, and therefore it is one that we need to take seriously. What are the merits and what are the pitfalls activism in teaching and scholarship, which seems to be the driving force for much of this current presentist turn?