Course description

Public health concerns and campaigns have always been bound up with the globalizing activities of trade, exploration, capital accumulation, war, colonization and industrialization. In the wake of these disruptive forces, public health crusades have done their work. Their success has been phenomenal. By extending life, they have changed its meaning.

Beginning with an overview of increasing global longevity in the last two centuries, this class will examine a series of episodes in the global history of public health, from the medieval plague to the new millennial diseases of affluence. Using the Gapminder website, we will examine and analyze global demographic statistics to think through what strategies extend human life, and why. By analyzing the political, cultural and economic dimensions of these strategies, we will use the lessons of history to pose urgent questions about how public health policies and initiatives work or fail to work across the globe. Proceeding chronologically, each week will focus on a different aspect of public health intervention, examining debates such as the politics of sanitation campaigns, the legacies of colonialism, the definition of progress, the rights and wrongs of ‘soft’ power, and the challenge of the population explosion.

Requirements

The class will meet MWF. Attendance is mandatory. There is no textbook for the class, and all readings will be available electronically on TED. Students must complete the assigned readings according to the schedule below, and must come to Friday’s class each week prepared to participate in discussion of that week’s readings. There will be two take-home examinations, consisting of short essay answers to set questions. The first, for 40%, will be due on the Friday of fifth week, the second, for 60%, due on the Friday of tenth week.
Schedule of readings and topics

FIRST WEEK: When and why did the gap begin to open?


SECOND WEEK: The origins of public health and epidemiology


THIRD WEEK: Hygienic modernity and colonial medicine


FOURTH WEEK: Universalism and world health

Universal Declaration of Human Rights


FIFTH WEEK: Decolonization


SIXTH WEEK: Barefoot Doctors to Alma Ata
The Declaration of Alma Ata

SEVENTH WEEK: Neoliberal public health


EIGHTH WEEK: Colonial legacies?


Olga Shevchenko and Renée Fox (2008) “‘Nationals’ and ‘expatriates’: Challenges of fulfilling “sans frontières” (“without borders”) ideals in international humanitarian action’ Health and Human Rights, Vol. 10 #1

NINTH WEEK: Contemporary Issues in Global Health


TENTH WEEK: Diseases of Affluence and the Politics of Pleasure