Predicting the Future

FIRST-UG 92
Fall 2015

1 Washington Place 401
MW 12:30-1:45

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The future is ephemeral, uncertain, and always seems just within reach. Cultures all around the world have developed a dizzying arraying of tools for divining the future, from reading goat entrails to calculating carbon dioxide concentrations. Prediction spans religious systems, political policy, business trends, and scientific theories. This course examines a variety of practices of prediction from different cultures, historical eras, and academic disciplines. We will assess the kinds of arguments used in prediction, and how evidence is marshaled to know the unknowable. Claims of prediction have high stakes: what we think about the future changes how we act in the present.

Goals:
- Learn how different disciplines and cultures pursue the goal of prediction
- Learn how to critically assess evidence and arguments for complicated claims
- Learn how to synthesize and balance multiple competing perspectives

Assignments:
The class is structured around three major units. Each unit will end with in-class group learning events where we practice our critical thinking skills. Each event will have a short writing assignment (3 pages) associated with it.

Everyone in the class will take a turn finding, researching, and presenting a failed prediction from the past.

Everyone will be required to post a brief response to each day’s reading on the course website discussion forum. The response should be about a paragraph, and can consist of your thoughts on the material, questions you have, or issues you would like to discuss. These posts must be made by 10am on each day class meets and will be used to help frame our class discussions.
The course grade will be determined as follows:
- Short papers: 15% (each)
- Failed prediction presentation: 15%
- Forum responses: 15% (combined)
- Class participation (including debates): 25%

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction in accordance with the Student Discipline Rules of the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Familiarize yourself with Gallatin’s academic integrity and plagiarism policies at http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html

Do not plagiarize. If you take more than two or three words directly from a textbook or another source (including the Internet), you must put them in quotation marks and cite their source in a footnote.

Late policy: Late assignments will lose a full letter grade for every 24 hours they are late. Assignments five days late will not be accepted.

If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with me soon.

We will be using these books, all available at the bookstore:
- Nate Silver, The Signal and the Noise
- Isaac Asimov, Foundation

The majority of the readings are available on the course website.

Class Schedule
- Sept 2 Introduction to the class
- Sept 7 No class – Labor day

Unit I: Predictions across cultures
- Sept 9  Omens (Enuma Anu Enlil; Rochberg, “If P then Q”)
- Sept 14 Prophecy (excerpts from Daniel, Matthew, Revelation)
- Sept 16 The Book of Changes (I-Ching; Smith, The I-ching: a biography)
- Sept 21 Scapulamancy (TBA)
- Sept 23 Astronomy (Ptolemy, Almagest)
- Sept 28 Astrology: (Ptolemy, Tetrabiblos)
Sept 30  Group Learning I. **Paper due**

**Unit II: The vicissitudes of prediction**

Oct 5  Predestination (Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*)
Oct 7  Determinism (Newcomb, “The Course of Nature”)
Oct 12  No class
Oct 13  Class! Predicting the past (“On the Method of Zadig”)
Oct 14  Historical inevitability (*Communist Manifesto*, pp.14-34)
Oct 19  No class: go watch *Minority report* (on reserve at Bobst)
Oct 21  Galactic prediction (Asimov, *Foundation*, parts 1, 2, 3, 5)
Oct 26  Predicting Behavior (Skinner, “Experimental analysis of behavior”)
Nov 2  Statistics (Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking*)
Nov 4  Chaos (Gleick, *Chaos*)
Nov 9  Quantum indeterminacy (Schlick, “Causality and quantum theory”; Eddington, “Decline of Determinism”)
Nov 11  Weather (*Vennor’s Almanac and Weather Record*)
Nov 16  Financial markets (Silver Ch 1)
Nov 18  Group learning II. **Paper due**
Nov 23  Futurism (Futurism readings)
Nov 25  Thanksgiving break

**Unit III: The meaning of prediction**

Nov 30  Create your own future (Merton, “Self-fulfilling prophecy”)
Dec 2  Cognitive dissonance (*When Prophecy Fails*)
Dec 9  Futures past (“Collapse of Western Civilization”)
Dec 14  Prior probabilities (Silver Ch 8)
Dec 23 (Final exam date) Group Learning III. **Paper due**