GRS850: American Historiography

This course offers an introduction to the study of American historiography—with its ample innovations and new directions—since the professionalization of the field in the late nineteenth century. It has two key objectives. First, it will focus on some of the most important debates and turning points in American history, giving students a sense of the major contours and general narratives that define the field. Second, by pitting against each other readings that address the same events or problems with different scholarly approaches, each week will familiarize students with different subfields and methods that have defined and reshaped the field.

The following books are the major texts we will be using this semester and have been put on reserve (or are available online through the library). It is also advisable to buy those that will be good references for you in the future.

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)
Mary Beth Norton, In the Devil’s Snare (2002)
Brendan McConville, The King’s Three Faces (2006)
Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul (1999)
James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades (1997)
Daniel Margolies, Spaces of Law in American Foreign Relations (2011)
Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire (2008)
Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow (1986)
Sven Beckert, The Monied Metropolis (2001)
Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness (1998)
William Leach, Land of Desire (1993)
Christine Stansell, American Moderns (2000)
Daniel Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings (1998)
Meg Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics (2005)
Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights (2002)
Schulman and Zelizer, Rightward Bound (2008)
Additional sources will be available on the Blackboard website (check http://blackboard.bu.edu). Readings posted on Blackboard are designated on the syllabus with **.

Class attendance and participation are mandatory. The other major assignments for this course are:

1. Each week, one student will offer the class a **book presentation**. The presentation should, in a clear and concise manner, discern for the class the overarching arguments and insights of the book, its strengths as well as weaknesses. Discussion might include the structure the book takes, the kinds of historiographical questions of central importance, and the ways in which the author works with evidence. It would also be helpful to include comments on how the book relates to the main readings for the week. Presenters should plan to talk for 5-10 minutes and then take questions from the class.

2. Submit at the start of class each week a sharp, 2-4 sentence distillation of each of the readings’ major arguments. Do this for all weeks except two.

3. A **book review**, modeled after the longer, more detailed reviews published in *Reviews in American History* should be completed for any week of choice on an additional reading not assigned but ideally related to that week’s themes. This essay should offer a thoughtful and engaging critique of a relevant piece of scholarship, which explains the basic argument of the book, assesses its strengths and weaknesses, and places the book in its historiographical context. (2500-3500 words). Review the essays in *RAIH* for ideas on how to accomplish this.

4. **State of the field essay.** This essay should pick a theme or topic of critical importance in American history and explore the state of scholarship on that theme or topic. Assess the most important scholarship on your topic and the major questions, problems, or preoccupations that emerge from this reading. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the field and speculate on what might be productive avenues of research and analysis for scholars to take in the future. (approx. 15 pages).

Your grade will be based on the overall quality of your written work as well as your contribution to class discussion.
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND READINGS

Tues., Jan. 17: Introductions

Reading: ** Sample book reviews and state of the field essays


Reading: John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982), intro, pts. II and IV.

Mary Beth Norton, In the Devil’s Snare (2002), omit chapters six and eight

Primary Sources: John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)
Essex county witchcraft trial records

Laura Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale (1991)
Kathleen Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wrenches (1996)
Carol Karlsen, Devil in the Shape of a Woman (1998)

Tues., Jan. 31: The American Revolution

Presentation: T. H. Breen, Tobacco Culture (1985)

Reading: Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (1967), chs 1-4

Brendan McConville, The King’s Three Faces (2006), chs 1-5, 9-10

Primary Sources: T. Paine, Common Sense (1776) and John Singleton Copley portraits

Recommended: Charles A. Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States (1913)
Alan Taylor, The Civil War of 1812 (2011)
Maya Jasanoff, Liberty’s Exiles (2011)
Tues., Feb. 7: Slaves and Slavery


Reading: Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul* (1999), intro, chs. 3-6

Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship* (2008), introduction, chs. 1-5, 7, epilogue

Primary Sources: Slave narratives

Recommended: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (1985)
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (1988)

Tues., Feb. 14: The Civil War


Reading: James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades* (1997)


Primary Sources: Letters from the front lines

Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (2010)
Tues., Feb. 28: Making the American West

Presentation:  **Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) and essays by William Cronin and Donald Worster in *Western Historical Quarterly*, April 1987

Reading:  Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (2008), omit chs. 1 and 6

Daniel Margolies, *Spaces of Law in American Foreign Relations* (2011), introduction and part 1

Primary Sources: Letters and photographs from the frontier


Tues., Mar. 6: Making Classes


Reading:  Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1986)

Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis* (2001), omit chs 5 and 7

Primary Sources: George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (1850)

Recommended:  Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1983)


Tues., Mar. 20: Race, Place, and Law


**Peggy Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” *JAH*, June 1996, 44-69.**


Primary Source: D. W. Griffiths, *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet* (2005)

Tues., Mar. 27: Imperial Ventures


Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium* (2007), intro, chs. 1, 2, 4, and conclusion

Primary Source: Henry Luce, “The American Century” (1941)

Paul Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism* (2001)
Tues., Apr. 3: Inventing Modernity

Presentation: Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace (1994)

Reading: William Leach, Land of Desire (1994), intro, chs. 1-3, 7-10, conclusion
Christine Stansell, American Moderns (2000), prologue, chs 1-3, and 7

Primary Source: Hollywood comedy

Recommended: Henry May, The End of American Innocence (1959)
Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream (1985)
Miles Orvell, The Real Thing (1989)
Emily Thompson, The Soundscape of Modernity (2002)

Tues., Apr. 10: Progressive Endeavors


Reading: **Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (1955), intro, chs. 5 and 7
Daniel T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings (1998), esp. prologue, chs 1-4 and 10

Primary Source: Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points (1918)

Recommended: Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism (1963)
Robert Wiebe, Search for Order (1966)
Michael Willrich, City of Courts (2003)

Tues., Apr. 17: Citizen and State


Reading: Meg Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics (2005), intro, chs 1-2, 4-5, epilogue
Sarah Igo, The Averaged American (2008), intro, chs 1-3, epilogue

Primary Source: Sears Christmas Catalog

Recommended: May Ngai, Impossible Subjects (2005)
Christopher Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You (2010)
James Sparrow, Warfare State (2011)
Tues., Apr. 24: Civil Rights


Reading: Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights (2002)
          David Chappell, A Stone of Hope (2004), intro., chs. 1-3, 5-8, and conclusion

Primary Source: MLK, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

Recommended: John Dittmer, Local People (1995)
          Danielle McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance (2011)

Tues., May 1: The Reagan Revolution

Presentation: Daniel Rodgers, Age of Fracture (2010)

Reading: Kim Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands (2009), intro, 2-5, 7, 9, biblio. essay.
          Schulman and Zelizer, Rightward Bound (2008), intro., chs. 1-2, 4-5

Primary Source: Robert Coles, The Middle Americans (1971)

          Betheny Moreton, To Serve God and Wal-mart (2010)
          Darren Dochuk, From Bible Belt to Sun Belt (2010)
          Judith Stein, Pivotal Decade (2010)

Final paper due May 8.