Introduction to American Historiography

This seminar introduces graduate students to the historiography of American history in the United States from its pre-professional founding in the nineteenth century to the present. We will evaluate “classic” texts as artifacts of their time but also as contributions to the development of a tradition of historical writing and provocations to consider the value and limitations of contemporary scholarship. “New Directions” is a selection of new approaches that seem to promise openings to the advancement of historical scholarship in the future.

The agenda of each seminar will be as follows. In the first part, a student will give an oral presentation on one “presentation” book listed for that week. In the second part we will discuss the two articles required for that week. The last part of the seminar will be devoted to a discussion of that week’s required book.

SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS

Discussions, Presentation, and Book Evaluation

Discussion: Seminar members should be prepared to discuss the required reading. Since much of what we learn will depend on the exchange of ideas in class, an important part of the grade will depend on the quantity and quality of oral contributions.

Book Evaluations: To help organize and focus one’s thoughts about the reading, each week students will submit short (2-page) responses to the central book, which will be due in class on the day it is discussed. The paper should provide a fair statement of the book’s primary themes and arguments as well as a brief evaluation of how well the historian establishes them.

Presentations: Usually at each class one student will turn in a 5-6 page paper on a “Presentation” book for that week, indicating its main themes, arguments, and methods and an appraisal of how well the author succeeds in mobilizing them as well as a brief indication of how they can be connected with the required book assigned to the class. On the same day the student will also give an oral report/critique of approximately fifteen minutes based on his/her paper. On the day of the student’s presentation, he/she is excused from turning in the short response paper for that week.
Historiographic Paper

An 18-20-page essay on the historiography of United States history based on the course’s readings and discussions will be due at the end of the semester. Which historians, movements, themes, arguments, and methods to emphasize is up to each student, but one might find it helpful to consult “state of the field” essays that appear in journals such as the Journal of American History, Reviews in American History, and Modern Intellectual History.

GRADE BREAKDOWN: Discussion 40%, Response and Presentation Paper and Report 30%, Historiographic Paper 30%

READINGS: Books that are required are available at BU’s Barnes and Noble bookstore or may be ordered from various online book sellers. Many may be accessed in digitalized form at Mugar’s e-books or e-reserve sites. Articles from journals are on J-Stor.

ETIQUETTE: To preserve a classroom atmosphere conducive to collective learning, turn off cell phones and use laptop computers sparingly and only for taking notes on the discussion. Laptop use should not interfere with your ability to interact with the instructor and other students.

PLAGIARISM: Read the Academic Conduct Code to understand the college policy on plagiarism. All cases of its suspected perpetration will be referred to the Dean’s Office. If found guilty, a student will receive the maximum punishment allowed at the university.

TOPICS AND READING SCHEDULE

Jan. 26   American Historiography: States of the Field

Feb. 2   Snow Day

Feb. 9   Objectivity and Professionalization: A Modern “Crisis”?  

Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession (1988)  


Feb. 16   President’s Day
Feb. 17  **The Progressive Historians and Social Conflict**


*Presentation*: Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913); or Carl Becker, *Everyone His Own Historian* (1935)

Feb. 23  **The “Consensus School” and Historical Critique**


Mar 2  **Intellectual History: From Ideas to Discourse**

Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, vol. 2: *From Colony to Province* (1953)


Mar. 7-15  **Spring Recess**

Mar. 16  **History and American Studies**

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964)

*Presentation:* Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950); or John William Ward, *Symbol for an Age* (1955)

**Mar. 23** Social History—Old and New


**Mar. 30** The Cultural Turn


**Apr. 6** New Directions: The Return of Political History


**Apr. 13**

**New Directions: Gender and Sexuality**


**Apr. 22**

**New Directions: Race, Transnationalism, and the non-West**

Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (2012)

Apr. 27  **New Directions: Intellectual History and Contemporary History—Too Close for Comfort or The Long Goodbye?**
