

CH 601: Introduction to Contemporary History

Professor: Kevin Mattson

Contact Information: 593-4342, mattson@ohio.edu

The purpose of this course is to introduce graduate students to the problem of historical interpretation, especially as it pertains to “contemporary history,” which in this permutation means both history of the recent past and historical understanding informed by the recent past (for an example of this broader interpretation, see Week Nine below). The course will examine both “classical” works of social and historical exploration and “theory” as well as more recent works.

This course will open by examining questions of historical inquiry and interpretation (hermeneutics). It will then show how contemporary questions (with deeper roots often, as is the case with Marxism and post-structuralism) have made an impact on the way historians try to analyze the past. We will examine some “classical” works in terms of framing historical exploration (Marx and Weber) and then look at current work (Foucault and Scott). Finally, in order to look ahead at CH 602 and 603, this course will end by briefly examining the relation between historical work and the “public sphere” in America today. In this way, the course will come full circle to its central question: What does it mean to make “use” of history in answering contemporary public questions?

Course Requirements:

You will hand in each class a one-page summation of all the readings due (a “reaction” paper so to speak). You will then do (a) One Report (this will be an oral report on the day of discussion of the book in question and a written report one week after the report is due; the written report needs to have a critical component to it while the oral report can be more of a description of the work) and One Paper or (b) Two Papers and no oral report. There is an advantage to doing the oral report, since you can “test” out your ideas on classmates and acquire critical feedback. Papers should relate to the themes of the course and will not require too much outside reading. If students want to propose a paper on readings outside of the class, that is acceptable, but it requires more work and thus should be given special consideration.

Books for Purchase:

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*

Neil J. R. Munro, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present*

Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style*

George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*

The rest of the readings will be available in packet form.

Week One: Introductions

During this meeting, we will assign reports and introduce the purposes of the course in further detail.

QUESTIONS OF (HISTORICAL) INTERPRETATION

Week Two: All History is Writing

Issues of writing:

Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style*

George Orwell, "Why I Write" and "Politics and the English Language"

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian as an Artist," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1963.

C. Wright Mills, "The Promise" and "Grand Theory," from *The Sociological Imagination*.

Week Three: The Problems of Interpretation, Hermeneutics, and "Objectivity"

Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"

Clifford Geertz, Selections from *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Anthony Giddens, "Hermeneutics and Social Theory"

Hans Georg Gadamer, "The Historicity of Understanding"

Jurgen Habermas, "Hermeneutics and Social Sciences"

Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation"

James Harvey Robinson, Selections from *The New History*

Charles Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *AHR* 39 (1934): 219-231.

Jon Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History"

Report: Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream*

Week Four: The Peculiar Challenge of doing *Contemporary History* (I)

Outside Viewing of Errol Morris's film, "The Fog of War." In-class viewing of interview with Charlie Rose.

Readings:

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian and History," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1963.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Inscrutability of History," *Encounter*, November 1966.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "On Writing History," in *Conversations with Henry Brandon*

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian as Participant," *Daedalus*, Spring, 1971.

Reports: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *One Hundred Days*
 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *War and the American Presidency*

Week Five: The Peculiar Challenge of Doing Contemporary History (II)

George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*
 David Greenberg, "George Bush, Hegelian," read on-line at slate.com

Report: Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight*

ORIENTATIONS/THEORIES

Week Six: Marxism as a Structural Approach to History and the Idea of Class

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*
 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: in xerox packet (students unfamiliar with events described here might want to consult a textbook on European history)

Report: David Noble, *Digital Diploma Mills*

Week Seven: Post-Structuralism (I): Deconstructing Modern Humanitarianism

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility: Parts I and II"

Report: James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*

Week Eight: Post-Structuralism (II): Putting Women Into History

Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*

Report: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions*

Week Nine: Putting Environment Into History

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*
 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground*
 Samuel Hays, "Comment: The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness"

Report: Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*

SHOULD HISTORY BE PUBLIC AND PRACTICED BY THOSE OTHER THAN HISTORIANS? (OR THE (AB)USES OF HISTORY)

Week Ten: Was History Once Useful and Public? *Can it Be Public?: The Search for a Golden Age and the Potential Future of Historical Writing*

Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present*

Kevin Mattson, "Channeling History"; supplementary essay to be handed out in class

Reports: David Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*

Jon Wiener, *Historians in Trouble*