

HIST 588: Graduate Readings in Nineteenth-Century American History

Spring 2009, Mondays 2-5 p.m.

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Course Description

This is a reading-intensive seminar designed to introduce graduate students to nineteenth-century American history, with particular attention to broad historiographical and interpretive debates about this period. While the reading list does not aim to provide a comprehensive treatment of this field, it aims to begin inquiries that can continue in further research, reading, and teaching on nineteenth-century subjects.

To focus our discussions, seminar participants in Spring 2009 will be considering several recent scholarly attempts to provide narrative syntheses of this period. The questions we will consider include: Is a narrative synthesis of the nineteenth century—or even of smaller eras like the “Jacksonian Period”—possible? Is it desirable? What are the advantages and disadvantages to attempting grand narratives of chronological periods? Is it possible to write narrative histories that integrate the methods of both social-cultural and political historians? What is at stake in debates among historians about “synthesis” in American history? Do recent calls for “transnational” history provide a viable new model for writing narratives about the nineteenth century United States, or challenge the writing of national narratives altogether?

A Note on the Reading Load

The amount of reading we will be doing in this course is substantial. In Week 3, for instance, we will read an 800-page book, and the following week we will discuss an 850-page book. Not every week will involve reading so many pages, but some will. When planning your schedule for the semester, as well as your reading schedule from week to week, you should be realistic about the amount of time it will take you to complete the reading for this course, but—and this is important—do not be daunted simply by the size of these books. Particularly in the first few weeks of the seminar, we will talk explicitly about techniques for reading quickly and effectively. In fact, part of the reason I have assigned such large books to be completed in only a week’s time is because I realize that the only way to complete this material is to learn skills like skimming (not the same as speed-reading), back-tracking, and reading for argument. Perfecting such skills is one of the objectives for this course.

Assignments

In addition to weekly seminar contributions, everyone will complete the following written assignments during the semester:

1. An historiographical review essay on Sellers, Wilentz, and Howe that discusses their interpretations of the period between 1812 and 1848 (roughly). Your essay, addressed to a professional audience of fellow historians, should use a critical discussion of these three books to advance your own thesis about how we

should best understand (or what we still need to understand better about) some aspect of the period. Much like multi-book reviews in a scholarly publication, your paper should be a cohesive essay with its own thesis, rather than merely three discrete book reviews put together. The essay should be no more than 4,000 words and is due by **January 30**.

AND EITHER ...

2. Another historiographical review essay on three to four additional books related to a subject not directly (or only partially) addressed by the required readings on the schedule. The subject must be related to nineteenth-century American history, but topics are negotiable. As part of this project, you will first need to discuss your proposed topic and proposed books with me by email or in person. The final essay, of no more than 4,000 words (excluding notes), is due by **April 6** and will be distributed to members of the seminar for discussion on April 13.

OR ...

2. An undergraduate course prospectus (including a rough 15-week schedule of topics and readings) for a course entitled "Nineteenth Century American History." At least some (and preferably most) of your reading assignments for the course should be drawn from books/articles or primary sources not included on our schedule. This prospectus should be accompanied by an essay of about 1,500-2,000 words discussing what you see as the major themes and objectives of your course and the rationale for your choice of topics and readings. The prospectus and accompanying essay are due by **April 6** and will be distributed to members of the seminar for discussion on April 13.

Your grade for the course will be based equally on the Sellers-Wilentz-Howe essay, your second essay/course prospectus, and your contributions to seminar discussions. After receiving grades and feedback from me, you'll have the option of revising both written assignments and submitting them for potentially higher grades by the end of the semester.

Schedule of Readings

Please complete all readings before coming to the seminar. You'll be invited to comment on, raise questions about, and evaluate the readings' arguments, structure, significance, and style. All required books listed will be placed on reserve at Fondren.

1. **January 5**

Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *JAH* 73, no. 1 (June 1986), 120-136. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1903608>

Eric H. Monkkonen, "The Dangers of Synthesis," *AHR* 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), 1146-1157. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1864380>

David Thelen, Nell Irvin Painter, Richard Wightman Fox, Roy Rosenzweig, and Thomas Bender, "Round Table: Synthesis in American History," *JAH* 74, no. 1 (June 1987), 107-130. Available on JSTOR.

William W. Freehling, "Toward a Newer Political History—and a Reintegrated Multicultural History," in *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (Oxford, 1994), 253-274.

Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *AHR* 100, no. 3 (1995), 651-677. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2168599>

Mary P. Ryan, "Narratives of Democracy, or History with Subjects," *American Literary History* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 311-327. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490299>

Thomas Bender, "Strategies of Narrative Synthesis in American History," *AHR* Vol. 107, No. 1 (Feb., 2002), 129-153. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2692547>

2. **January 12**

Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford, 1991)

Also: Daniel Feller, "The Market Revolution Ate My Homework," *Reviews in American History* 25.3 (1997), 408-415, available online at Project Muse.

3. **Week of January 19**

Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln* (Norton, 2005). (Meeting will be rescheduled for observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.)

Also: Jill Lepore's review of Wilentz in *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2005. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/24/051024crbo_books; Sean Wilentz, "Bush's Ancestors," *New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 2005, online.

4. **January 26**

Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford, 2007)

Also: H-SHEAR Forum on Howe (links will be provided).

5. **February 2**

Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (Hill and Wang, 2007).

6. **February 9**

Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (Harper Perennial, 1990)

Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Harvard, 2005).

7. **February 16**

Nell Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era* (Norton, 1987)—new edition okay too.

And one of the following ...

Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Hill and Wang, 1966)

Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (Oxford, 2003).

Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (Oxford, 2006)

8. February 23

Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *AHR* 96, no. 4 (October 1991), 1031-55.

Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" *AHR* 96, no. 4 (October 1991), 1056-1067.

Ian Tyrrell, "Ian Tyrrell Responds," *AHR* 96, no. 4 (October 1991), 1068-72.

David Thelen, "Making History and Making the United States," *Journal of American Studies* (Spring 2001), 1-19.

Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (California, 2002), chapters by Bender, Bright and Geyer, Walter Johnson, Wiebe, and Hollinger.

Louis A. Perez, Jr., "We are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International," *JAH* 89, no. 2 (September 2002).

9. March 2

NO MEETING. Spring Break.

10. March 9

Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (Hill and Wang, 2006), chapters 2-5.

Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), introduction, chapters 1-10.

11. March 16

C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Blackwell, 2004)

12. March 23

Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Duke, 1993), 3-21.

James T. Campbell, Matthew Guterl, and Robert G. Lee, eds., *Race, Nation, and Empire in American History* (UNC, 2007), selections TBD.

Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Cornell, 2008).

13. March 30

Reading TBD.

14. April 6

No meeting. **HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY or SYLLABUS DUE!**

15. April 13

Discussion of written work.

Please note: This schedule is subject to change, and I may also supplement it with recommendations for *optional* brief readings, such as book reviews or review essays about the books we will be discussing.