

Brett L. Walker

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HIST 540 History Methods

Office hours: Tuesday 10:00-12:00 or by appointment (Wilson 2-160)

HIST 540 HISTORY METHODS

(T 3:10-6:00 Wilson 2-274)

This seminar is designed to introduce graduate students to history as an academic discipline. It is an introduction to not simply the past, but an introduction to a past that is structured to legitimate, elucidate, or bolster arguments born from contemporary political, social, and cultural debates. Importantly, history might be seen as the disciplining of the past, or a manner of organizing events into narratives that conform to a chosen theoretical and argumentative logic.

In this respect, history might be seen as disciplined memory, and who imposes that discipline, and with what theoretical structures they do so, is a critical question for historians to consider. In order to accomplish our goals, this course investigates the history of modern historical studies, a field known as historiography, as well as the recent emergence of several important fields, such as social history, the “linguistic turn” and cultural history, women’s history and gender studies, environmental history, deep history, and western revisionist history. Some of these are politically charged histories, such as the contact, trade, war, and genocide of Native Americans in the Southwest. Our purpose is not to define the discipline through an investigation of this rich historiography, but rather to investigate the relationship of history to politics and to identify wherein lies history’s fundamental authority to create knowledge. We will also spend a great deal of time thinking about what constitutes a good history topic because eventually you will be required to find one.

You will write several response papers to representative books and major essays—some classic works, others more contemporary—in order to identify the scholarship’s key contribution. The purpose here is to familiarize you with some of the dominant trends in historical studies, and also to prepare you to frame—or rather “discipline”—your own work with these dominant theories. At the end of the seminar, when we do “Topic Brainstorming” and, later, when you defend your topics, I will be primarily interested in how you fit your scholarship into social history – perhaps Marxist structuralism – or feminism, the “linguistic” or cultural turn, environmental history, or deep history. It is critical that you understand where your topic fits within these major schools of thought.

Required readings:

Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*

Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*

Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*

Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*

Timothy Snyder. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*

Pekka Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire*
Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*
Various PDF articles available on D2L course site

Assignments:

1. Student-led discussions of the assigned readings: Students, or small teams of students, lead the discussions of the assigned readings each week. All student-led discussions must be driven by PowerPoint presentations that include, but are not limited to, sample quotes from the books or articles, ones that can be analyzed by the entire seminar (20% of grade).
2. Eight 800-word papers on the topics articulated below (50% of grade).
3. One 1000-word research topic prospectus and accompanying PowerPoint presentation on the chosen topic (30%).

Reading Schedule

Week One (08/29: 3:10-6:00): Introduction

Our first meeting will be Tuesday, August 29, from 3:10-6:00 in Wilson 2-274. During this meeting we will discuss the syllabus and describe the general organization and expectations of the course. Please be prepared to introduce yourself and your academic interests.

Week Two (09/05: 3:10-6:00): From the Social to the Cultural

Required reading: Eley, *The Crooked Line*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): Describe the rise of social history in the 1960s and the “linguistic turn,” or the rise of cultural history, in the 1980s. In Eley’s opinion, was the discipline weakened or strengthened by the emergence of cultural history? If so, what is it about cultural history that has empowered or strengthened the discipline? What was lost with the rejection of social history?

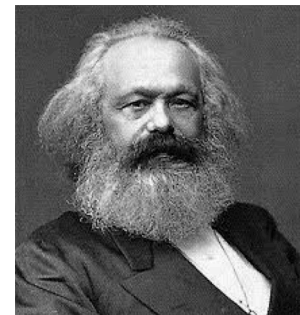
Week Three (9/12: 3:10-6:00): Material Turn

Required reading: Marx, *Selected Writings* (Simon, Editor).

You are principally responsible for the readings under “Writings on Historical Materialism” (pp. 102-213), with particular attention to *The Communist Manifesto*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): Marx believed that history is progressing somewhere or evolving into something. He understood that history has an end, a phenomenon known as “teleology.” This is “developmental” or “structuralist” history, or history with a sense of order and, ultimately, purposefulness. For Marx, why is history important, where is it headed, and what does it teach? Why is he often viewed as the consummate materialist? What are the benefits and pitfalls of structuralism?

Karl Marx

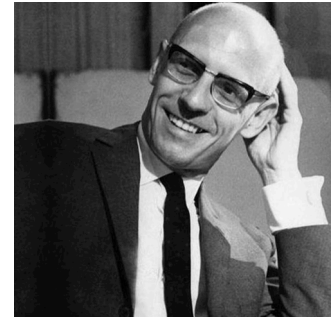


Week Four (09/19: 3:10-6:00): Cultural Turn

Required reading: Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (Rabinow, Editor).

Question (800-word reaction paper): If Marx is the prince of materialism then Foucault is the prince of cultural history. For Foucault, history, or the social sciences in general, is mostly about culture and power and not, for instance, materialism and progress. In the introduction, Rabinow argues that Foucault is suspicious of any claims of “universal truth,” such as those contained in Marx’s developmental model, and instead examines the historical context and social functioning of such concepts. Rabinow writes that for Foucault, “there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society.” Often, such concepts serve as “disciplining technologies,” which transform people into “subjects” or “docile bodies.” What are some of Foucault’s prominent examples of “disciplining technologies,” ones that control human subjects in the modern world?

Michel Foucault



Week Five (09/26: 3:10-6:00): Heroes and Antiheroes

Due: One-paragraph draft description of your research topic (turn in to D2L). Please be prepared to briefly introduce your topic in class and why you think it is important.

Required readings: Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): Inspired by Margaret Sanger, Wonder Woman is often viewed as a feminist icon, testimony to the Amazonian power of women. But, as Lepore demonstrates, Wonder Woman’s creator, William Moulton Marston, had a somewhat creepier side, and led a life that often flew in the face of feminist ideas. Often, this bizarre lifestyle bled into Wonder Woman’s comic life. Your question: Can a feminist hero participate in bondage? What kinds of sources and theoretical assumptions does Lepore use to approach this tricky topic?

Week Six (10/03): Library Work (Meet at Renne Library, MSU)

3:10-4:00 Library Research (Janelle Zuaha)

4:10-5:15 Digital Archives (Janelle Zuaha and Jason Clark)

Week Seven (10/10: 3:10-6:00): Revising the West

Required readings: Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): *Comanche Empire* is about the “rise, anatomy, costs, and fall” of Comanchería, or what Hämäläinen provocatively calls the “Comanche empire.” Hämäläinen places the story of Comanche empire in the geopolitics of European expansion, showing how North America existed as a “small-scale world-system,” one that resisted the control of European powers. Evaluate Hämäläinen’s contention that Comanchería constituted an empire. Then, evaluate his assertion that, if we view Comanchería as an empire, there is a historical “reversal of roles.” Suddenly, it is a “story in which Indians expand, dictate, and prosper, and Europeans colonists resist, retreat, and struggle to survive.” Identify the kinds of sources that he uses and the kinds of theories that guide him. How does he craft a Comanche perspective? In your estimation, does Hämäläinen successfully revise our understanding of western U.S. history?

Week Eight (10/17: 3:10-6:00): Cognitive Turn

Required readings: Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): If Foucault represented a turn away from Marxist materialism, with his rejection of truth claims and focus on the social functioning and political power of “disciplining technologies,” then Smail’s “deep history” represents a new form of developmental model, one rooted not in class conflict or historical progress but rather in shared human evolution. Principally, deep history forces historians to rethink conventional notions of time by questioning our adherence to the divide between “prehistory,” when biology reigned, and “history,” with the ascendancy of “culture.” If “prehistory” humans are the same souls as “historical” humans (we are the same species, that is to say), then it makes sense that we search for answers to human behavior in our biological past. This is what Smail calls pursuing the “biological legacies of the deep past into the present.” What is important about structures and models is that they empower social scientists to draw conclusions about experiences across vast cultural divides, rather than reject any universals or commonalities in the human experience. What is the new structure erected by Smail’s deep history and, importantly, what serves as its foundation?

Week Nine (10/24: 3:10-6:00): Natural and Unnatural Calendars

Due: Final draft of one-paragraph description of research topic (turn in to D2L).

Required readings (PDFs are available on D2L): Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*; selections (pp. 205-231) from R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222; and Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature,” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614-621.

Question (800-word reaction paper): What does the advent of the “Anthropocene” geologic epoch mean for the study of history? Does it discredit the role of such categories as nations, ethnic groups, and even the species in historical analysis, given the planetary reach of the current environmental crisis?

Week Ten (11/31: 3:10-6:00): Zoological Anarchy and Lessons

Required readings: Snyder. *Black Earth*.

Question (800-word reaction paper): In one of Snyder’s more memorable phrases, he labels Adolf Hitler a “zoological anarchist,” a worldview that shaped Hitler’s approach to World War II in Europe and the Holocaust. Your question: Does Snyder successfully identify the environmental seeds of Hitler’s war and the Holocaust? What are his notes of caution for our times, and do you agree with his assessment?

R.G. Collingwood



Week Eleven (11/07: 3:10-6:00): Primary Source Presentation
Presentation on Research Methods

Week Twelve (11/14: 3:10-6:00): Prospectus Presentation
Delivery: Student PowerPoint topic presentations.

Week Thirteen (11/21): No Class

Week Fourteen (11/28: 3:10-6:00): Prospectus Presentation
Delivery: Student PowerPoint topic presentations.

Week Fifteen (12/05: 3:10-6:00): Prospectus Presentation
Delivery: Student PowerPoint topic presentations.

Final Assignment: 1000-word research topic prospectuses due to D2L Monday, 12/11 at 5:00PM.