AMH 6290—MODERN AMERICA

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Meeting Time: Thursdays, period 8-10 (3:00-6:00 pm)
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Readings in the History of Modern America

This is a readings seminar, designed to introduce you to the major themes and significant works in twentieth-century United States history. The objectives are pretty basic, but pretty important as well:

- To help prepare students to teach courses in modern U.S. history, especially the survey course, by encouraging critical thinking about organizing and making sense of the existing historical literature.
- To help prepare students for their qualifying exam in modern U.S. history, by presenting students with an appropriate survey of themes and works in this field.
- To nurture your skills (and mine) in the areas of critical reading and writing, by focusing on thoughtful analysis of assigned texts. We will pay attention to argument, sources, and organization.

Readings for this seminar include a mix of more recent works of historical scholarship with more established classics in the field, all of which have had (or appear that they will have) significant impact on their field. Remember that there has been much work of value published before 1994—the publication date of the “oldest” work we will read for the seminar—and remember that the notes in most monographs provide a ready way to work backwards through the essential literature in the field. You can create a very good roadmap by paying attention to the author’s footnotes. Please note as well that while we have it easy in some ways—one country, one century—there is still no way to fully do justice to every field or subject. Some of you may find Populism, the First World War, Vietnam, or labor history slighted, and you are probably right. Some of you may find too much politics and policy, and you may be right as well! Make sure that you develop final papers that allow you to pursue that which is most interesting to you, regardless of what we have done in the course.

Please remember that this course intendeds to be helpful. Toward that end, please remember that collegiality and mutual support are essential. Respecting your comrades’ voices and views—even as you may freely choose to voice your disagreements—is essential. Please bear this in mind as we go through the semester.
Assignments and Grading

The breakdown of the course grade is simple.

Class Participation (30%)—This grade is based on different elements of your class participation. Each week, you are expected to attend seminar—and to demonstrate during the seminar that you have read and understood that week’s required reading! You demonstrate this understanding through meaningful participation in the discussion at hand. Your class participation grade also includes your performance the week you set the discussion agenda and lead discussion. Setting the agenda involves two important steps. First, you must submit SIX focused and interesting (!) questions related to the week’s reading to the instructor and the other students, and you must do this by the Monday night before our Tuesday class. Second, you should take about ten minutes at the start of the class session to present an overview of the critical issues, then get the discussion going.

Book Reviews (30%)—You will have two different 3-page critical reviews to turn in, and each is worth 15% toward your final grade. In each, you will be asked to present a critical review of the required reading for that week. You may choose to do one of these reviews on the week you are leading discussion!

Final Paper (40%)—Your final paper (15 pages in length) is worth 40% of your final grade. This paper should provide a comprehensive review of a specific historiographic literature—the area on which you choose to focus is something that you’ll do in collaboration with the instructor. You’ll have to do readings beyond those in the syllabus to put together the best possible paper, and I will work with each of you to help guide you to the most appropriate sources. These papers are due WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, by noon in my office!

Students Requiring Accommodations

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, https://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

University Honesty Policy

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Honor Code (https://www.dso.ufl.edu/secr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions.
Course Evaluations
Students in this class are participating in the pilot evaluation of the new course evaluation system called GatorEvals. The new evaluation system is designed to be more informative to instructors so that teaching effectiveness is enhanced and to be more seamlessly linked to UF’s CANVAS learning management system. Students can complete their evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__ufl.bluera.com_ufl_&d=DwIGaQ&c=sJ6xIWYx-zLMB3EPkvcnVg&k=1qtWVKU2uNohMAWR5pYYVu0E_t9jxk4wL-DeSEfmKub76k8eaDIYyGQkZMpcQZ6&m=KCQMaruvDecGkQ95LBWWejChKpHpdp3olzGps63zo0Ao&s=2ry1lk1s2MT9xMTXgaRslOLmzE7-Mky8W2E.HUO3wQ&c= . Please note your other classes this semester may be evaluated in the current GatorRater online evaluation system at https://evaluations.ufl.edu<https://evaluations.ufl.edu/>. Thank you for serving as a partner in this important effort.

The Books, Briefly
Here are the twelve books required for the seminar. If circumstances permit, you should try and purchase as many as you’re able. A copy of each has been held on reserve in Library West, and I have marked with an * those books that are available through the UF Library as E-books. E-books (which includes seven of the assigned texts) can be a helpful way of reducing the cost for the seminar. The actual schedule of readings follows.

Vanessa May, Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940 (2011)
Weekly Schedule of Topics and Readings

Week One (August 22)—Making Sense of the Century

Our first week is a bit different from the rest. Rather than a single monograph and a long list of recommended readings, we simply have two articles to discuss. Each helps us sort out what it means to tell the story of the twentieth-century United States. Ross helps us consider what it means to tell a story in the first place, while Kramer explores the boundaries of our explorations.

Required Reading(s):


Week Two (August 29)—A Modern Nation and Its People

This week, we turn our attention to the emergence of the “modern” United States. The historian’s challenge here is to develop and understand issues of race, class, ethnicity, and gender within the currents of a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing nation and its highly mobile population. We will follow some of these threads through Matthew Frye Jacobson’s Barbarian Virtues, which remains a foundational text for scholars interested in these questions.

Required Reading:


Recommended Readings:

Donna Gabbacia, Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers (1988)
Gary Gerstle, American Crucible (especially the first three chapters)
Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (1998)
Week Three (September 5)—Progressive Reform and Politics

This week, we take on the era of Progressive reform and the ways in which historians have tired to make sense of the period. Your required reading for the week is an impressive contribution to the conversation, another foundational text for the field, which remains highly relevant after two decades. It is also rather dense (the footnotes alone can keep you occupied for some time), so your task is to read this for the argument (Chapters 1-6 should give you the basic flavor of what Rodgers is trying to say). The recommended reading list can help steer you in the direction of more recent work.

Required Reading: Daniel Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (1998)

Recommended Readings:

Week Four (September 12)—Women, Labor, and Reform

This week, we'll examine the concept of “maternalist social policy” and the ways in which historians have considered women’s roles and authorities in social welfare. What are the benefits and the limitations of Muncy’s “female dominion”? How does this work speak to the larger questions about Progressivism that we considered the previous week?

Required Reading:

Vanessa May, Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940 (2011)

Recommended Readings:

Nancy Hewitt, Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s (2001)
Week Five (September 19)—Culture, Identity, and Conflict

This week, we’re exploring issues of culture and identity (individual and collective). The readings listed below cover the period before World War II rather broadly, but clearly the “pivot point” seems to be the 1920s. Does George Chauncey’s work help us make sense of the “Twenties” as a distinct cultural moment, and how does it help make sense of the shift from “Victorian” to “modern”? More broadly, Chauncey’s work helps us come to terms with the dynamism of masculine identity, and the spatial dimension of social life.

Required Reading: George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*

Recommended Readings:

Week Six (September 26)— The New Deal and Modern Liberalism

This week, we will resume a conversation about the competing understandings of the American state and the meaning of citizenship, this time through the lens of the cultural politics of the New Deal. How does this work help explain what the “New Deal” era really was? What are the competing theories of the American nation here? Does it build a bridge to postwar social, cultural and political life in America?

Required Reading: Jerrold Hirsch, Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers Project

Recommended Readings:

Anthony Badger, Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina (1979)
Barry Cushman, Rethinking the New Deal Court: The Structure of a Constitutional Revolution (1998)
Ellis W. Hawley, The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly (1966)
Robin Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (1990)
William Leuchtenberg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (1963)
Edward A. Purcell, The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value (1973)
Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (1996)

Week Seven (October 3)— World War II and the United States
This week, we examine the wartime homefront and the corresponding changes in the development of the wartime state. (NB: There is an enormous literature on the military and political dimensions of the war, and those of you interested might begin by consulting David Kennedy’s bibliography in *Freedom From Fear*, noted above).

**Required Reading:** James Sparrow, *Warfare State*

**Recommended Readings:**

John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory* (1976)
William O’Neill, *A Democracy At War: America’s Fight At Home and Abroad*
Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of World War Two*

**Week Eight (October 10)— Mass Consumption, Consumers, and Economic Citizenship**

This week, we’ll take a look at the evolution of historians’ understanding of “consumer culture.” From the margins of historical interest, consumer culture emerged as an important but often distinct subject of investigation. Over the course of the last 20 years, consumption has gradually been brought into the social, political, and economic histories of Twentieth-Century America.


**Recommended Readings:**

Week Nine (October 17)—Cold War and the Cold War Era

This week, we consider the Cold War. The list of recommended readings contains many readings related to “Cold War Era” politics and society, readings with which I strongly urge you to familiarize yourself. Other work on the list focuses on the Cold War itself—the great contest between the US and the Soviet Union, and works that discuss both causes, periodization, and global dimensions. Still others situate the Cold War in the longer arc of American history. In reflecting on these readings, if you choose to, you might consider how broad stories of this period might best integrate international conflict with domestic social conflict? For our own reading this week, however, I have chosen a rather unique comparative study, tracing the parallel stories of US and Soviet plutonium cities. It is a different take on the era, also a stellar example of comparative history.

Required Reading:

Week Ten (October 24)—Building Postwar America

This week’s reading doesn’t waste much time. Robert O. Self’s first line reads: “The most significant political, economic, and spatial transformation in the postwar United States was the overdevelopment of suburbs and the underdevelopment of cities.” This week, we’ll see if he’s right about that. More to the point, we’ll explore the author’s contention that one cannot speak of one without the other.


Recommended Readings:

John Findlay, Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940 (1993)
Howard Gillette, Jr., *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City* (2005)
Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985)

**Week Eleven (October 31)—The Fight for Rights**

This week, for the first time this semester, we take on a biography as our guide to the subject. Although I'm tempted each week to assign a biography, this recent work stands out as a particularly notable example of the biographical approach to writing history.


**Recommended Readings:**

Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (2006); see also *Parting the Waters* and *Pillar of Fire*
Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979)
Week Twelve (November 7)—Mass Incarceration and the Ascendancy of Modern Conservatism

Traditionally, we have used this week to examine the rise of modern conservatism, consider its links with traditional conservatism, try and locate its genesis, and consider its scope and meaning. We shall do some of that, but also take a closer look at what is ostensibly a marker of modern conservative politics, the age of mass incarceration. The recommended readings focus on the former—the footnotes to “Getting Tough” can fill in the literature on drugs/crime/mass incarceration.


Recommended Readings:

- Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (1990)

**Week Thirteen (November 14)—Public Health in Modern America**


Recommended Readings: This list is being revised…I'll add this once the term begins.

**Week Fourteen (November 21)—**No class meeting today. I'll be available this week for consultations on the historiographical papers.