History 612  Introduction to Historical Methods

Wednesdays, 2:00 - 4:50, McKenzie 375

This course is intended to help entering graduate students think about the way histories are crafted. Some of the characteristics of good historical scholarship hold true across all fields: good scholarship elaborates an original and persuasive argument, imparts a substantial amount of new information, rests on solid research, and is written in a clear and engaging style. Beyond that, however, historians differ with respect to the evidence they seek, the questions they ask, the theoretical models they espouse, and the genre of their presentation. This course is framed around the first two of these indices -- evidence and questions -- though issues of theory and genre are likely to emerge in the course of discussion.

When historians talk about evidence, they may be referring to a variety of things. They may refer to facts or events that support an interpretation. They may refer to data of various kinds. Most often, though, when they talk about evidence, historians have in mind primary sources, whose collection, synthesis, and interpretation arguably constitute the defining method of our discipline. The historian’s encounter with sources has a major impact on the writing of history, as it is a key avenue through which we develop something new to say. New sources may enable the historian to answer questions, but they may also open up new lines of inquiry or condition the questions that the historian asks. The encounter with sources is thus a creative encounter as well as an essential part of our research practice.

The first of the two units of our syllabus centers on precisely this creative engagement. Each week (weeks 2-6), we will be reading works that highlight a particular class of sources. This is clearly an artifice; most historical writing relies on a variety of sources, and even the books and articles selected here draw on a wider source base than the week’s heading implies. Still, by isolating, to the extent that it is possible, treatments of particular kinds of primary source, the course should help you to think about the types of questions that can be explored or answered with the help of each source, and to give you a sense of the possibilities for framing historical writing through sources. There is also a short writing assignment (5 pages) that asks you to choose a class of sources and analyze its impact on your geographical and chronological field.

The second unit (weeks 7-10) centers on recent trends in the historical discipline. In previous years, I have used the second half of the course to consider the development of distinctive subfields of history, such as intellectual history or military history. This time, I decided simply to choose a handful of acclaimed recent books -- prize-winners in various fields -- as a vehicle for discussing the kinds of approaches and projects that seem to capture the attention of historians today. As it happens, most if not all of the books in the first half of the course also won book prizes, so that is something of a red thread through the course as a whole. In highlighting recent works, this course and its instructor take no stand on the relative merits of recent approaches versus older approaches to history, but simply aim to give you a sense of the field as it is currently practiced.
Grading: Grades will be based on a holistic evaluation of your class preparedness and performance on written and oral assignments. Since graduate students tend to be very good students, the grading scale is foreshortened. I use A- to indicate solid performance, clearly satisfactory for the graduate level (I expect this to be my standard grade, but I may be wrong and end up giving more As). An A means especially impressive work that exceeds my expectations at the graduate level. Grades in the B to B+ range tend to mean that your performance fell somewhat short of my expectations in terms of intellectual sophistication or thoroughness. Grades below a B are rare at the graduate level, and should be taken as a real warning. You will get feedback on each assignment so that you have a sense of how you are doing in the course.

Assignments: There are three kinds of assignments for this course: papers, methodology exercises, and an oral interview with a UO faculty member.

-- Interview. Students quickly learn which faculty members work in geographical and chronological areas adjacent to theirs, but they do not always find out who has relevant methodological expertise. In the interests of helping you match your interests to potential outside members of a thesis committee, and also simply to vary our class time a bit, we will be interviewing faculty members about their scholarship. Each of you will sign up to interview one of the professors on the syllabus, who may not be your primary advisor. In preparing your interview, you will need to see what the person has written and try to track how their interests have shifted over time. You do not need to read any book in its entirety, but try to get a sense of what the person was trying to accomplish in his or her writing, focusing especially on books and recent articles. That way, you will be able to frame your questions about the historian’s methods, sources, thematic interests, etc. in an informed way. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes -- and since historians can be garrulous with regard to their research, we may well get through fewer topics than you prepare.

-- Methodology exercises. The two written methodological exercises focus on secondary resource materials. I’m expecting 2-3 pages for each.

-- Papers. There are two short papers for this course, each of which also entails compiling a bibliography. Both assignments ask you to analyze your own chronological/geographical field in relation to the units of the course.

First paper: due at noon on Friday, November 4: Choose a class of sources that has been incorporated into research in your field. a) Develop a list of important sources in the class that you have selected. Where possible, annotate the list: where can this source be obtained? Does it have any peculiarities that one should be aware of? b) Identify a few secondary works (books and articles) that utilize your class of sources extensively. c) Without necessarily reading these histories through (rather, you might focus on reading the introduction and conclusion and glancing through them, as well as perusing some reviews), discuss the way that historians have used your class of sources, its limitations, and its relationship to your specific field (historiographically, or in terms of the specificities of the political system and/or culture you study), in a 5-page essay. Important: This is an assignment that you should discuss with your principal advisor.

Some types of sources to consider, in addition to the ones we are discussing in class (this is not an exhaustive list!): oral history; archeological evidence; manuscripts; newspapers; census records and other statistics; family records; public opinion polls; surveillance; corporate records; professional journals; medical records; police records; parliamentary debates; petitions; memoirs.

Second paper: due at my office on the Wednesday of finals week. This assignment has four parts. a) Choose a major journal in your field of study, and read through it (not necessarily every article, review, etc., but enough to get a serious sense of it) for the past five years. What can you say about the current trends in your field on the basis of this journal? b) Do a sampling of a year or two from each of
two earlier periods. What were the main trends in the field 15 years ago? What about 30 years ago? If
the journal that you chose for (a) was not around 15 or 30 years ago, you may work with a substitute. c)
Write a 6-8 page paper that presents your findings. Try to comment a bit on particular articles as illustra-
tions of the trends you wish to highlight as well as making general characterizations. d) Along with the
paper, submit an annotated bibliography of ten journals relevant to your field. This may include some
general historical journals that occasionally publish on your area of interest as well as more specialized
journals. The annotation may be very brief (i.e. one sentence), but at least glance over each journal to try
to identify its distinguishing characteristics.

Books. All books are available for purchase at the UO Bookstore. You may wish to save money by or-
dering some of them on Summit (the library consortium). Be aware, however, that there are not enough
copies in Summit for everyone in the class. A few supplementary readings are posted under “Course
Documents” on Blackboard.

Jochen Hellbeck, Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin (Cambridge: Harvard
University Press, 2006).
Martha Hanna, Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War (Cam-
bridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World
Peggy Pascoe, What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America
Pier M. Larson, Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora
(Cambridge University Press, 2009).
Dorothy Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding (Berkeley and Los
Germany (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006).
Allan M. Brandt, The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product

Class schedule

Wednesday, September 28. Introduction (note: we will not need the whole three hours)

Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Getting Personal: On Subjectivity in Historical Practice” (article on Black-
board).

Assign interview subjects

Part I. Some types of sources as reflected in historical scholarship

Wednesday, October 5. Intimate sources: diaries

David M. Luebke, either “A Multiconfessional Empire” or “Confession of the Dead: Interpreting Burial Practice in the Late Reformation” (your choice; both on Blackboard)

Interview: David Luebke

Wednesday, October 12. Intimate sources: letters


Interview: George Sheridan

Wednesday, October 19. Quantitative sources.


Interview: Glenn May

Methodology exercise (due in class): Write a brief review of four reviews of Pomeranz’s book, including the review essay by Gupta and Ma. Try to use reviews from journals with different audiences. What criteria did different reviewers use in their evaluation of the book? Did different reviewers find the same things important? How do you understand the differences that you can identify among the various reviews?

Wednesday, October 26. Legal cases


Interview: Marsha Weisiger

Wednesday, November 2 Language and linguistic change


Interview: Sean Anthony

***First paper due Friday, November 4, at noon***
Part II. Historiographical trends

Wednesday, November 9. Women’s and gender history, modernity


Bryna Goodman, introduction to Gender in Motion (on Blackboard)

Interview: Bryna Goodman

Wednesday, November 16. Environmental history


Interview: John McCole

Methodology exercise: Encyclopedias. Choose an event (fairly narrow but not too obscure) and a person (political, cultural, intellectual, military, etc.) in your particular historical field. Look them up in three reference works: 1) Wikipedia; 2) another fairly general encyclopedia (ideally, choose one in a different language) and 3) a specialized historical encyclopedia. How would you compare the treatment in each in terms of thoroughness of treatment, accuracy, up-to-date information, and slant? Evaluate the utility of each resource in a brief written report.

Wednesday, November 23. History of medicine, material culture, business history


Daniel Pope, introduction to Nuclear Implosions (Blackboard)

Interview: Daniel Pope

Wednesday, November 30. Atlantic history, culture, slavery


Interview: Carlos Aguirre

*** Second paper due Wednesday, December 7, at noon. Slide under my McKenzie office door.