MTWR 10-12 130 Wheeler

HISTN131B:
Social History of the United States Since 1914

Instructor: Robert Chester
Email: robertnchester@gmail.com

Course Requirements:
Participation: 10%
Midterm: 30%
Essay: 25%
Final Exam: 35%

Required Texts

Course Reader Available at Copy Central on Bancroft Way

Course Description: This course satisfies the campus’ American Cultures requirement. It examines the ways that larger structural forces shaped and continue to shape the everyday lives of Americans from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Conversely, we will also examine the actions taken and choices made by individuals and groups who tried to adapt to rapid cultural, economic, and social changes and others who believed that desired changes proved elusive and halting.

We will begin our semester by exploring the contradictory impulses of Progressive Reform movements. Many Progressive Era activists combined motives of both social justice and social control in their strategies to achieve tenement reform, labor reform, improvements in public health, expanded access to birth control, women’s suffrage, prohibition, and other causes. We will explore the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Fire that occurred in New York in 1911. Students will learn how this tragedy provoked debates about workplace safety, the labor of women, and the excesses of capitalism. Next, students will read Larry May’s "Screening Out the Past" which demonstrates how the rise of movies and the creation of Hollywood contributed to the growth of a mass consumer culture that transformed how Americans thought about themselves both as individuals and members of imagined communities. As they rapidly increased their active participation in an expanding consumer society, audiences also began to follow cultural
cues provided by Hollywood’s emerging powers to shape attitudes and behaviors. From the influence of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* to reinvent the historical memory of the Civil War and encourage the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan to the creation of celebrity and the star system, movies would dramatically reshape how Americans interacted with one another in their daily lives.

We will also examine the ways that both World Wars and the Vietnam War shaped the lives of the soldiers, workers, and families who participated in and experienced these events. We will start by examining the repression of dissent and the persecution of immigrants and labor radicals during World War I and how the intense xenophobia exacerbated by government propaganda contributed to the Red Scare. When discussing World War II, students will explore how reading primary documents authored by participants in the historical drama provides a less glamorous view of a truly sobering and traumatic period in the nation’s history. A focus on the horrors of actual combat will complicate oversimplified stories of heroism and honor and discussions of Japanese Internment and race riots will point up the limits of and obstacles to the promise of American ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom. However, we will also explore the economic and social opportunities provided by the war for previously-marginalized groups such as women, African Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Chinese-Americans. The Vietnam war will provide students the opportunity to appreciate the intersection of a variety of overlapping issues and movements in the lives of Americans in the sixties and seventies: the political posturing of cold war anti-communism, the rise of the anti-war movement in the New Left and critiques of imperialism at home and abroad, the experiences of soldiers in a war that would be vilified rather than celebrated, the power of images on television to shape political opinions, and a growing distrust of government that only intensified with the economic and political crises of the seventies.

Another major theme of the course will be the centrality of racism in the lives of immigrants, African-Americans, and other minorities. From the Great Migration to immigration restriction and the Ku Klux Klan, readings and lectures will explore how white Americans tried to draw and police firm boundaries separating themselves and many groups of “others.” More specifically, students will read Richard Wright’s memoir, *Black Boy*. This book immerses students in the daily lives and struggles of African Americans attempting to survive the dehumanizing effects and violence of the Jim Crow South. It also exposes students to the experiences of African Americans who left the South to migrate to northern cities like Chicago. Students will also read Mae Ngai’s *Impossible Subjects* and discuss the relationships between conceptions of citizenship, race, national identity, and both legal and illegal immigration. In reading and discussing Ngai’s work, we will pay special attention to the ways that government policies and law have shaped the mistreatment and many obstacles confronted by Japanese-Americans, Filipino-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and many other groups. In addition, students will also read a brief excerpt from Ruben Martinez’s *Crossing Over*, which will familiarize students with the continuing controversies about immigration policies and the confrontations and tragedies that occur along the US-Mexico border and in the lives of so many illegal aliens.

Readings, lectures, and films will also analyze other groups and individuals that organized to expand the definition of equality and create spaces for self-determination,
cultural autonomy, and social improvement. To this end, students will view *The Times of Harvey Milk*. The documentary chronicling the life and death of Milk will expose students to the many struggles, achievements, and enduring legacies of a leader who helped shape a growing movement to empower the LGBT community. In addition to the ways that movements fashion new identities for their members, students will also explore the ways that some individuals struggle to navigate the identities and expectations imposed upon them by their families and communities. James Welch’s novel, *Winter in the Blood*, depicts the coming-of-age struggles of an American Indian teenager living in an economically depressed and geographically isolated region of Montana after World War II. In an environment of alcoholism, racism, and poverty, Welch examines the conflicted character of family, community, and identity for Native Americans in the late twentieth century. Family provides a source of strength and support as well as suffering and shame in Welch’s novel. In the context of learning about the American Indian Movement and the seizure of Alcatraz, Welch’s novel provides a more nuanced view that helps to ground students in the everyday lives of people who remained on the racial and geographic margins of white society.

Analyses of the New Deal and the Great Society will explain the historical contexts and political circumstances that allowed for the creation and later the expansion of social welfare programs that responded to dire needs, structural inequalities, and the demand for more effective taxation and regulatory policies. In exploring Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, students will first examine the structural economic causes and cultural trends that contributed to the Great Depression. Then, we will explore both the ways that ordinary Americans adapted to these challenging new circumstances. Next, students will learn about the political strategies employed by the president and his allies, the important new coalitions formed, their legislative achievements, the emergence of Keynesian economic policies, and the limitations of New Deal reforms. By extension, subsequent lectures and readings will examine the efforts to both expand and erode social programs and regulatory reforms by Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan and others.

The course also examines how the Cold War shaped political ideologies, family structure, gender relations, suburbanization, and consumer culture. To this end, students will read Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound*, a social history of family and America’s Baby Boom. *Homeward Bound* provides students with insights into the ways that the everyday actions of middle-class Americans living in newly-built suburbs reflected the anxieties of Cold War fears of nuclear war, white flight and urban decline, and the quest for an illusory past where gender conventions were stable and reassuring. Students will also learn about the many social movements that emerged from the late fifties through the seventies and how many activists of this so-called New Left tried to expand definitions of equality, reclaimed and reinvented identities, and struggled to solve enduring problems of poverty, violence, sexism, racism, and homophobia.

Ultimately, we will also analyze the deep roots of America’s economic decline from 1970s forward. Lectures, readings, and films will illuminate the economic and social impacts of deindustrialization, deregulation, Neo-Liberal economic policies, urban crises, tax revolts, the Reagan Revolution, the defunding and dismantling of social services programs, and the transformation of labor markets and job opportunities. Thus, to end the course, students watch Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me* and read excerpts from
Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel & Dimed*. These sources will offer students vivid accounts of how larger structural changes have reshaped people’s lives over the past several decades.

**Exams:** The midterm exam will consist of a blue book analysis of course materials comprising four short-essay identifications and one longer essay based on a pre-circulated prompt. For the longer essay, students must write an analysis of Larry May’s *Screening Out the Past* or Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. The Identification portion of the midterm will account for forty percent and the longer essay will account for the remaining sixty percent of the student’s exam grade. The final exam will also require a blue book. Students will answer four Identifications and write a longer essay based on a pre-circulated prompt that addresses one or more of the following readings: Mae Ngai’s *Impossible Subjects*, James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*, Ruben Martinez’s *Crossing Over*, and/or Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel & Dimed*. The Identification portion of the final exam will account for forty percent and the longer essay will account for the remaining sixty percent of the student’s exam grade.

**Essay:** Each student must write an essay between 1300 and 1800 words analyzing Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound*. All essays must be double-spaced and typed in 12-point Times New Roman font. All essays must also provide a minimum of ten footnotes. Each essay must explicitly answer each question included in the pre-circulated prompt. DO NOT USE PARANTHETICAL CITATIONS. DO NOT USE OR CITE OUTSIDE SOURCES

**Cheating or Plagiarism:** “Achievement and proficiency in subject matter include your realization that neither is to be achieved by cheating. An instructor has the right to give you an F on a single assignment produced by cheating without determining whether you have a passing knowledge of the relevant factual material. That is an appropriate academic evaluation for a failure to understand or abide by the basic rules of academic study and inquiry. An instructor has the right to assign a final grade of F for the course if you plagiarized a paper for a portion of the course, even if you have successfully and, presumably, honestly passed the remaining portion of the course. It must be understood that any student who knowingly aids in plagiarism or other cheating, e.g., allowing another student to copy a paper or examination question, is as guilty as the cheating student.” The above language comes from the University of California’s own policy description defining cheating and plagiarism (which can be found at http://catalog.berkeley.edu/policies/conduct.html). More specifically for this course, the following all qualify as cheating and/or plagiarism in my view: failure to cite sources, the repeated absence of quotation marks where warranted, presenting someone else’s ideas or work as your own, and using notes, books, or electronic devices during in-class exams.
**Laptops and Other Electronic Equipment:** If you wish to use a laptop to take notes during my lectures, feel free to do so. However, please sit in the very back of the lecture hall in order to avoid distracting other students. Please refrain from texting or manipulating your phone or other gadgets while in class. More generally, please act courteously out of respect for me and your fellow students during both lectures and discussions. Thank you.

**bSpace:** The instructor will use bSpace (https://bspace.berkeley.edu/) to provide students with a range of course materials. The instructor will post the following on bSpace: the syllabus, lecture outlines, discussion questions for assigned readings, writing assignments, and primary documents. The instructor will also use bSpace to make announcements, such as reminders about deadlines and extended office hours.

**Course Calendar**

**(Assigned Reading:** Documents on Women on bspace; Larry May, *Screening Out the Past*, pp.v-viii, xi-241)


*Tuesday, May 22:* “Laboring for Many Causes: Workers, Progressives & Reform”

*Wednesday, May 23:* 1) “The Social as Political: Women, Progressivism, and Reform” 2) Discussion of Documents on Women

*Thursday, May 24:* “Mass Slaughter, Repression & Regret: Americans & WWI”

**(Assigned Reading:** Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, pp.3-257; Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, pp.xix-90)

*Monday, 28:* No Class/Memorial Day

*Tuesday, May 29:* “From Character to Personality to Celebrity: Manufacturing Abundance and the Growth of Consumer Culture”

*Wednesday, May 30:* 1) “Restless Natives: the Ku Klux Klan, Fundamentalism, and Other Isms” 2) Discussion of May, *Screening Out the Past*

*Thursday, May 31:* 1) “Oppression & Exodus: Jim Crow & the Great Migration” 2) “Exodus & Emigrant Subcultures: The Dust Bowl & the “Okie” Migration”

**(Assigned Reading:** Wright, *Black Boy*, pp.258-384; Excerpts from Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* and *The Good War* in Course Reader; Great Depression Documents on bspace; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, pp.167-201)

*Monday, June 4:* 1) Discussion of Wright, *Black Boy* 2) “In the Long Run We Are All Dead”: Relief, Reform & Keynesian Strategies”

*Tuesday, June 5:* 1) Discussion of Terkel, *Hard Times* & Great Depression Documents 2) “‘Best War Ever’: Americans & WWII”


*Thursday, June 7:* Midterm Exam
(Assigned Reading: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, pp.ix-208)
Tuesday, June 12: 1) Film: *Eyes on the Prize: Bridge to Freedom* 2) “An Ambitious Vision: LBJ & the Great Society”
Wednesday, June 13: 1) “Problems with No Name: Women’s Movements” 2) Begin Discussion of May, *Homeward Bound*
Thursday, June 14: 1) Finish Discussion of May, *Homeward Bound* 2) Film: *Two Days in October*

Wednesday, June 20: 1) “Restoring Faith: Reagan & the New Right” 2) Discussion of Welch *Winter in the Blood*
Thursday, June 21: Film: *The Times of Harvey Milk*

(Assigned Reading: Excerpts from Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* and Ruben Martinez, *Crossing Over* in the Course Reader)
Monday, June 25: 1) “From Braceros to Chicanos: Mexican Americans & Immigration since the Sixties” 2) Discussion of Ngai, pp.91-166, 202-270 and excerpts from Martinez, *Crossing Over*
Tuesday, June 26: 1) “A-Not-So-New Economy: Neo-Liberalism & the Deep Roots of Economic Crises” 2) “From Segregation to the Swoosh: Sports and Society since WWII” 3) Begin Film: *Roger & Me*
Wednesday, June 27: 1) Finish Film 2) Discussion of *Roger & Me*, and excerpts from Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*
Thursday, June 28: Final Exam