The History of the American Present

FYS 158. Fall 2020.
Instructor: Dr. Jordan Taylor (pronouns: he/him)
Class meeting: Tuesday and Thursday, 1:40–2:55pm (Eastern Time).
Office hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 4:00–5:00 PM (Eastern Time).

Course description

Some have defined history as "what the present needs to know about the past." What do we need to know about the past today?

In this course, we will use a historical perspective to try to understand why the world is as it is. To manage that lofty ambition, we will structure our inquiry around three "historical questions." All historical research begins with a question. The "historical question" allows one to define the scope of their inquiry and begin the process of finding and evaluating sources. You and I will work together to create the define the direction of our course as well as assigned readings.

The course is divided into five units. First, we will define what makes for an effective historical question and formulate several of them about the present (see "Asking Good Historical Questions" on page 9, below). The next three units will be designed to answer historical questions about the present through a collaboration between students and myself. We will conclude with a unit focused on the process of translating our historical knowledge to broader audiences.

This course will focus on American history, broadly understood. Depending on the questions that we formulate, we may also delve into related topics.

Learning objectives

Education is a process, not an outcome. My goal is that we grow together in this course. Here are some objectives I have for the semester.

- Historical questions: Students will be able to formulate effective historical questions.
- Research: Students will be able to develop strategies to effectively answer such questions.
- College learning: Together, students will learn both how to learn in a college-level environment, and how to learn in a remote-learning environment.
- Argumentation: Students will be able to use evidence to construct meaningful historical arguments.
- Audience: Students will be able to translate the results of research to public audiences.
- Revision: Students will hone their capacity to edit and improve their written work in response to constructive feedback.

Your objectives

In the space below, take a few moments to think through your objectives for this course. What do you hope to get out of it?

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Course format

This course will contain both synchronous (meaning that we will be talking together on Zoom at the same time) and asynchronous (meaning that you can do them on your own time) elements.

We will make use of several digital tools:

- WordPress: Our course's WordPress site will host our syllabus and contain links to various resources.
- Exit tickets: For each class period, you may complete a short "exit ticket" that asks you to reflect briefly on that class's material.
    - Note: completing exit tickets will boost your participation grade.
- Perusall: We will be collaboratively annotating our course's readings using the platform Perusall. More information about collaborative annotation is available on the WordPress site.
    - Note: Participating in Perusall annotation will boost your participation grade.
- Slack: We will use Slack as an informal space to communicate about course expectations, to discuss the course's material asynchronously, and to create a community for our course.
    - Note: Participating in Slack discussions, of any kind, will boost your participation grade. If you are not participating in Zoom or Perusall discussions of readings, you must use Slack to discuss them.
- Zoom: During class times, we will meet for Zoom discussions to discuss the readings, your questions, and other topics relating to that day's topic. These may last for the 75-minute class period, or shorter. Because this is a discussion-oriented class, rather than a lecture course, *I strongly encourage you to attend as many Zoom discussions as possible.*
    - Note: Participating in Zoom discussions will boost your participation grade. I will not be taking attendance for each Zoom discussion but will keep a general sense of who is participating and them and who is not. Participating in Zoom discussions will heavily boost your participation.
    - Zoom link: https://smith.zoom.us/j/94791352777
- Videos: This is not a lecture course, but I will occasionally create brief videos to provide additional context for readings. These will be available through our course site on WordPress.

Virtual "office" hours

If you are not familiar with the concept of "office hours," they are a set period of time when your professors will be waiting for students to come talk with them. You might discuss the course, your work, get to know your instructor, raise concerns, or ask questions. Anything, really. Your professors are eager to talk to students in office hours. Attending office hours is a good way to ensure that your instructors know you. If you can't make office hours, just send an email letting your instructor know this, and offer some other possible times to meet.

We will meet for office hours on Zoom. The link to the Zoom room where we will meet is: https://smith.zoom.us/my/jordantaylor

During the first few weeks of class, an expanded time frame for office hours will be available. Most weeks, however, I will plan for office hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 4:00–5:00pm (Eastern Time). You can schedule a meeting during these times using this tool: https://appoint.ly/s/jtaylor/officehours If you cannot meet during those times, please just send me an email with a few times that would work for you, and we'll figure out a time to meet.

Course materials

There are no required books. All materials for this course will be made available through WordPress.

Assignments

- Attendance and participation (10%)
    - Meeting with instructor
- Unit essays (20% each; 60% total)
- Annotated op-ed and reflection (5%)
- Op-ed (25%)

Attendance and participation

You will turn in two "participation portfolios," one halfway through the semester and the second at the semester's conclusion. These will be Google forms. In this portfolio, you should lay out the extent of your engagement with the course and its materials over the relevant period. You should also provide some evidence to support that. For example, you should share your extent of participation in synchronous discussions, Slack, Perusall annotations, emails, and office hours. You are welcome to include annotations or comments that you made.

Finally, your portfolio must include a self-assessment. What letter grade do you deserve for participation? Why? You may also share any circumstances that constrained your participation in our class (though you are not required to disclose anything specific or personal).

I will grade your participation based on your portfolio as well as my own judgment. If our assessments differ markedly, I will explain my thinking. I will judge participation based on the following rubric:

Grade	Discussion	Engagement with instructor	Communication with Peers
A range	Extensive engagement with 2–3 discussion resources (Slack, Perusall, Zoom meetings, exit tickets).	Asks questions; attends office hours; professional communication	Extensive engagement with peers through Slack, Zoom, Perusall, etc
B range	Significant to moderate engagement with 1–2 discussion resources	Moderate engagement with instructor	Moderate engagement with peers
C range	Limited engagement with 1–2 discussion resources	Limited engagement with instructor	Limited engagement with peers
D–F range	No or limited engagement with discussion resources	No engagement with instructor	No engagement with peers

Meeting with instructor

You are required to meet with me one-on-one within the first four weeks of class. This meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss your expectations and hopes for the class, your learning needs, and any concerns. We may also discuss how this class can help you with your course of study at Smith College and your future. For the most part, though, this conversation will focus on getting to know you, where you're from, why you came to Smith College, etc.

This conversation does not need to be long. It could last anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. We may speak in office hours, over Zoom, before or after class, or at another time depending on your availability. You are responsible for either attending office hours or setting up another time to meet with me during the first four weeks of class.

Unit Essays (20% each; 60% total)

At the conclusion of units two, three, and four, you will write a 4-page double-spaced essay that uses evidence from course materials to answer the historical question posed by that unit. A full draft will be due on the final day of each unit (see the schedule below). I will provide feedback and we will workshop papers in class. Your final, revised unit essay will be due a week after the workshop.

Your essays will be graded according to the following criteria:

- Argument: Your essay should develop a clear argument in response to the prompt.

- Evidence: Your essay must make use of evidence from course materials (primarily readings but also discussions and lectures).
    - Citations: Whenever you make use of someone else's ideas, you must directly cite them. Please use Chicago citation style.
- Revision: This writing-intensive course is focused on providing you with tools and feedback to grow as a writer. Your grade will therefore not only reflect the quality of the final product, but also the extent to which it reflects meaningful, thoughtful revisions based on feedback on the draft.
- Clarity: The final essay should be carefully proofread, thoughtfully structured, and free of errors.

Annotated op-ed and reflection (5%)

You will create an analytical annotation of an op-ed from the *Washington Post*'s "Made by History" section. If you are having trouble accessing an appropriate op-ed, contact me. This will be due on Oct. 1. The annotations should both identify and evaluate the op-ed's headline, hook, argument, call-to-action, and use of evidence. Are these elements effective? If so, why? If not, what might the author have done differently? If you were this author's editor, what suggestions would you have? You can annotate it by copying it into Microsoft Word or Google Docs and using the comments function.

Additionally, along with this annotation, you will write a brief 200–300-word reflection about your chosen op-ed as a whole. Do you think it is persuasive? Do the expectations of the genre enhance or limit its persuasiveness? Would there be a better way to make the change for which this op-ed advocates? What might that look like?

Op-ed (25%)

Your final project for this course is an op-ed. An "op-ed" is a piece of opinion-based commentary published in a newspaper or magazine. It is called an "op-ed," because it traditionally appeared on the *opposite* page from the *editorial* section of the newspaper. Scholars, politicians, and all kinds of experts often write op-eds in order to provide their informed perspective on current events. You will be reading many op-eds in this class.

You will compose an 800–1,000-word op-ed of your own that includes an original argument building on one of your Unit Essays. It should be intended to help us to understand current events or our present in some way. This assignment will include several parts: (1) Proposal, due Nov. 17; (2) Draft, due Dec. 1; (3) individual Zoom meeting with me, due Dec. 3; (4) Final paper, due Dec. 10.

Extra credit: COVID-19 Chronicles

Our course is about historicizing our present. But we should not forget that we are living through a historic moment that needs to be documented.

You will receive extra credit amounting to up to two percent of your final grade if you complete a reflection on your first semester at Smith College according to the criteria of the College Archives' COVID-19 Chronicles project.

NOTE: The College Archives makes the following point about access: "The materials donated will be made available for research use by anyone, and available on the open web for anyone to see. This is a wonderful opportunity for us all to tell our stories, but it also means that anyone can have access to this information. If you are concerned, you may request that a 5-year restriction be placed on your material as outlined in the deed of gift." Because I do not want to force anyone to make potentially personal reflections available to the College in perpetuity, you are *not* required to submit your reflection to the project. However, if at all possible, I strongly encourage you to do so.

Your reflection should be 400–500 words. It may contain media (images, audio, video, etc). You are welcome to be creative with this assignment. You should submit this near the end of the semester, but before December 10.

Policies

I believe you: This is a difficult time for us all. When you share something with me, my default position will always be to trust you. I understand that this pandemic and remote learning are affecting all of us in different ways, and that not everyone will be able to work at the capacity that they would otherwise expect. Anything you share with me will, of course, be confidential.

Put your health first: If you find yourself sacrificing your mental or physical health for this class, please get in touch with me so that we can work together to avoid that.

Identity: This course recognizes your right to determine your own name(s), pronouns, and identities. Students should expect to learn one another's names (including pronunciations) and pronouns.

Flexibility: These are unusual conditions for your first semester of college. I wish that it was otherwise. I have done my best to design this course in ways that take into account the possibility of disruption. This semester calls for flexibility and grace. Because we will be working together to create this course, and because we are learning in extraordinary circumstances, we must all be flexible and understanding with each other this semester as possible.

Religious holidays: This course respects students' observance of religious holidays. Email me to ensure that you aren't penalized.

Email and Slack communication: I expect all students to regularly check email and Slack. For simple queries, please consult the syllabus before emailing me. I expect you to communicate professionally over email.

Plagiarism: Using someone else's words or ideas as your own, without clearly quoting and citing them, is plagiarism. It is a violation of the Honor Code. I will follow the college's procedures about plagiarism, which means bringing the matter to the Class Dean and the Honor Board.

Privacy: I consider most written work turned in for the class to be fair game for class discussion or activities, unless it clearly discusses sensitive personal matters. If you would prefer that I refrain from using a part, or all, of your written work in class discussion, please indicate that when you turn it in.

Writing for this class: This is a writing-intensive First Year Seminar course. As a result, it conforms to the College's expectations for the quantity of graded, written work. In addition to required drafts listed below, I am always happy to look at a piece of writing before it's submitted (as long as I have enough time to review it—at least 48 hours). In some cases, I may ask you to resubmit work.

Reading for this class: Readings for this course are primarily argument-driven essays. As you read, think about the following: what is the author's argument? Why is she making that claim? What evidence is she using to support it? How do you evaluate the argument?

Have you ever read something and then realized that you weren't paying attention the entire time? Simply passing your eyes over every word on the page, without thinking about it, is "lazy reading." It might make you feel like you've read the assignment, but it doesn't accomplish much. Instead, we will practice active reading. That means reading with a purpose: pause to take notes or ask questions, annotate, pause to look up words or references that you don't understand, skim through repetitive sections, spend more time on meaningful sections. Reading is a conversation between you and the author. Ask them questions, challenge them, and don't take everything they say for granted.

You are not expected to read every word on every page of every reading. Your goal is to understand the reading's argument as well as the nuance and complexity that surrounds that argument. You should take some time, even if it's just two minutes, after each reading to think about what you've just worked through, and why it might be important.

Community standards: In our second class meeting, we will discuss our course's expectations and policies. Together, we will craft a list of "community standards" that will consist of our values and expectations for this class, which I will circulate once it's finished. Because I will be enforcing these policies, I reserve the right to "veto" any policies that I feel are unworkable. Below are the topics and questions that we can use as starting points to frame these conversations.

- Discussion: how can we create space for meaningful discussions?
- Respect: how can we ensure that everyone in the classroom feels respected and valued?

- Zoom expectations: how do we avoid Zoom fatigue? How can we create productive conversation?
- Content warnings: how can we prevent trauma from harming students and interfering with student learning?
- Late work and extensions: how can we allow for students to make mistakes and respond to stressful conditions while remaining fair to everyone?
- Other topics? What other issues would you like to raise or discuss?

Resources

Sexual misconduct: I am a responsible reporter regarding incidents of sexual violence and misconduct. That means that I am required to report incidents of sexual violence to our campus's Title IX Coordinator. In that event, the Title IX Office will work with a small number of others on campus to ensure that appropriate measures are taken, and resources are made available to the student. Protecting a student's privacy is of utmost concern, and all involved will only share information with those that need to know to ensure the University can respond and assist. See **https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/title-ix**

Accessibility: It is important to me that everyone is able to succeed in this course. I will work with all students to accommodate any disabilities. We are lucky to have an excellent Office of Disability Services (ODS) at Smith. Note that they will work with you even if you don't have a formal doctor's note. Please submit requests for accommodations to ODS as soon as possible. They will generate a confidential letter that indicates the specific kinds of support that you need in the classroom. Please know that you don't need to disclose your specific disability to me, and ODS will not unless you ask them to. **https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/disability-services**

I try to make this course as accessible as possible. My understanding of what accessibility means is always evolving. Please help me by letting me know if I can do anything, even if it seems small, to make the class more accessible at any point in the semester. You can do this through email, in person, or through this anonymous Google form. When you submit to the Google form, I will get an email with your request but with no personal information.

Writing center: The Jacobson Center for Writing is an incredible resource that offers appointments and walk-in peer tutors to help you to develop your writing abilities. They are prepared to help students with public writing.
https://www.smith.edu/jacobsoncenter/

Asking Good Historical Questions

A good historical question is essential for thinking like a historian. It should place meaningful boundaries around your inquiry. It's not a topic—it's something that has a definite answer.

A good historical question should meet the following criteria:

1. It should be open-ended. A good historical question is not a yes or no question.
    - "Did the Southern strategy really exist?" demands a simple yes or no answer to a complex question.
2. It should be answerable with evidence, rather than with opinion.
    - "Was George Washington a bad person because he owned slaves?" is ultimately an ethical question that historians alone cannot answer.
3. It should be clear and precise. It should focus on something particular, rather than a transhistorical phenomenon.
    - "Does technological change cause political change?" is imprecise. A better, more particular version of this historical question might be "What impact did the invention of the printing press have on the European Reformation?"
4. It should *not* be counterfactual. Your historical questions should remain within our plane of reality.
    - "If Hitler had never been born…" is the beginning of a classic counterfactual. It's fun to speculate about such questions, but it's ultimately impossible to answer them.
5. It should *not* contain embedded assumptions.
    - "Have American police always been racist?" is a loaded question. It presumes, rather than proves, that American police as a whole are a racist institution. You may agree or disagree with that, but a better formulation of this might be: "How did the relationship between race and police evolve after the U.S. Civil War?"
6. It should *not* be semantic. Your question's answer should not depend on how you define your terms.
    - The answer to the question "Was the American Revolution really a revolution?" really just depends on what you mean by "revolution."
7. For the purposes of this assignment, the answer to our questions should matter to us. It should help to explain our world in some way.
    - "How did Stonewall Jackson's flanking maneuver affect the outcome of the Battle of Chancellorsville?" is, to some people, a fascinating question. But however exciting it may be, it is unlikely to help us to better understand twenty-first century America.

You should begin by thinking about topics that you would be interested in knowing more about. The topics that our class decides to investigate might be arise out of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests about race and policing, the 2020 presidential election, contemporary media and technology, your experience of higher education, or anything else that would merit a sustained historical analysis. *Note: As instructor, I reserve the right to reject historical questions that would, in my judgment, not serve the purposes of our course.*

Unit One: Historical Questions

Sept. 1: Course Introduction and Historical Questions

Sept. 3: Community standards and op-eds
Due: Historical questions.
Due: Annotated syllabus.

Unit Two: "Is economic inequality in the United States unusually extreme today? If so, why?"

Sept. 8: Mythologies of Equality
- Read: Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin,* excerpt.
- Read: Alger, *Ragged Dick,* excerpt.
- Read: Washington, *Up from Slavery,* excerpt.
- Read: Tocqueville, "Why Democratic Nations Show A More Ardent And Enduring Love Of Equality Than Of Liberty," from *Democracy in America*.

Sept. 10: The Undeserving Poor
- Read: Newman, "Almshouse Bodies," from *Embodied History* (2003).
- Read: Kohler-Hausmann, "'The Crime of Survival,'" (2007).
- Read: Clinton, "Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity," (1996).
- Read: Nadsen, "Extreme poverty returns to America," *Washington Post* (2017).

Sept. 15: "The Quiet Plunder": The Racial Wealth Gap
- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* (2014).
- Read: Jenkins, "The Racial Wealth Gap and the Problem of Historical Narration," *Process* (2017).
- Read: Rothstein, "The New Deal as raw deal for blacks in segregated communities," *Washington Post* (2017).
- Explore: Mapping Inequality.

Sept. 17: The Deserving Rich
- Skim: Carson, "Natural Aristocracy, Republican Polities, and the Meanings of Talent," from *The Measure of Merit* (2007).
- Read: Bowler, "Wealth," from *Blessed* (2010).

Sept. 22: A Global Perspective
- Skim: Atkinson, "Learning from History," from *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (2015).
- Read: Scheidel, "The Great Compression," from *The Great Leveler* (2017).

Sept. 24: The Postwar Pivot
- Read: Hinton, "The War on Black Poverty," from *From the War on Poverty to the War on Drugs* (2016).

- Read: Cowie, "A Collective Sadness," from *Stayin' Alive* (2010).
- Read: Schermerhorn, "Racial divides have been holding American workers back for more than a century," *Washington Post* (2017).

Sept. 29: Workshop
- Due: Full draft of paper #1.

Unit Three: TBD

Oct. 1: Op-Ed workshop
Read: any three op-eds in the *Washington Post*'s "Made by History" section. What historical questions are they addressing?
Due: op-ed analysis.

Readings TBD: Oct. 6–22.

Oct. 13: Fall break

Oct. 27: Workshop
Due: Full draft of paper #2.

Unit Four: TBD

Readings TBD: Oct. 29–Nov. 12.

Nov. 17: Workshop
Due: Full draft of paper #3.
Due by the end of the day: Op-Ed proposal.

Unit Five: Public Writing in History

Nov. 19: Conclusions (final class Zoom meeting)

Nov. 24: Individual Zoom meetings
Due: Paper #3.

Dec. 1: Individual Zoom meetings
Due: Op-ed draft.

Dec. 3: Individual Zoom meetings

Dec. 10:
Due: Final op-ed.
Due: Participation portfolio #2.
Due: COVID-19 Chronicles extra credit.