STS 210J/21H.991J:
Theories and Methods in the Study of History

Overview:

The purpose of this course is to acquaint you with a variety of approaches to the past used by historians writing in the last several decades. We will examine how these historians conceive of their object of study, how they use primary sources as a basis for their accounts, how they structure the narrative and analytical discussion of their topic, and what are the advantages and limitations of their approaches. One concern is the evolution of historical studies in the western tradition, which is not to say that the western approach is the only valid one, nor is it to suggest that we will only read histories of the west. But MIT and many of the institutions in which you will work during your careers are firmly rooted in western intellectual paradigms, and the study of times and places far removed from the western past has been deeply influenced by western historical assumptions. (And, to be honest, this is the historical tradition with which I am most familiar!)

We will begin with a brief overview of the construction and deconstruction of historical thinking in the west from the European renaissance to the present. Then we will consider questions of scale, a major preoccupation of post-WWII historians: should history be written at the national, global, or micro level? Next, we will sample two of the more recent innovative trends in the historical profession, environmental history and gender history. How does the incorporation of these perspectives alter our traditional national, global, and micro perspectives? After these considerations, we will turn our attention to historiographical evolution by looking at one of the richest, most contested fields of the past two centuries, the study of the French Revolution of 1789. Finally, we will think about the future of the past by reading the work of a contemporary historian committed to introducing neurobiological perspectives into the historian’s analytical repertory.

Our focus, therefore, is on structure, methodology, and conceptualization, not on specific historical content. A sizeable proportion of the studies here focus on early modern Europe (roughly 1500 - 1800 A.D.), because of the richness of its historiographical tradition. We will think about the reasons for the broad influence of this work throughout the semester. I would urge you to read in areas with which you are not familiar as well as in home ground. It is not necessary to "know the facts" or become an expert in any of these areas; the point is to find out how similar historical approaches work in different cultural areas and time periods. You will also note that a number of the
core readings are drawn from the work of historians who teach in the HASTS program. I especially want you to have some familiarity with the contributions to new fields of history made by your immediate colleagues. When possible we will invite MIT colleagues to join us for discussion and I strongly encourage you to take opportunities to discuss the work of this course with them in person.

**Requirements for the course:**

1) Read the core readings for each week and be prepared to discuss them in class. Some of these works are large, fat books. I will give you some hints to devise the best way of tackling them. (Starting at page one and plowing straight through is almost never the best method.)

2) Read or skim at least one of the works from the supplementary list. Each week you should submit **before** the class meeting (Monday afternoon at the latest), a forum posting of at least two to three substantial paragraphs with your reactions to the reading (not summaries, but critiques: reasoned argument is preferred, but gripes and raves are allowed). In the interests of fairness, I will also post a reaction each week. These will be useful in stimulating discussion. This is mainly a discussion course; I may sometimes give brief orienting lectures, but I will try to keep them short. Also, someone may be assigned each week to report on one of the supplementary readings, orally: this can be more of a summary with critique, like an extended book review. (Look at reviews in the *American Historical Review* or *New York Review of Books* for examples)

3) Finally, at the end of the term, a longer paper is due (10-15 pp). You are free to choose the subject, but you should take one of two tacks: 1) "Horizontal": examine the characteristics of the same historical approach used in several different countries and time periods (one of these countries should be non-Western), e.g.: the historical demography of 17th century France and Japan; the history of women in twentieth-century Russia and China; 2) "Vertical": examine a variety of perspectives on the same historical topic (the French Revolution is the classic one: it is open to Marxist, populist, economic, cultural, feminist, and many other interpretations. We will be examining some of these approaches in our readings towards the end of the term. Other good possibilities are the English Industrial Revolution, American slavery, European imperialism). In either case, you need to search out the major works in the literature, analyze the basic problématique, discuss the different analytic tools and sources employed, and evaluate the relative merit of different approaches. You might even have ideas of your own about where work in this subfield should go, which you should feel free to develop. You will find, I suspect, that science and technology get short shrift in most historians’ accounts. Think about how they might usefully be integrated into general history.
Books to Acquire

These books are available for sale at the MIT Bookstore, and have also been placed on 2-hour reserve in the Humanities Library. Other core readings indicated below with an asterisk will be available on the web site for this subject.

- Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Cornell UP, 2009)

Books to be Provided by Instructor

I will provide copies of the following required books:


Schedule of Readings

Week 1

9/8. Reg Day – No Classes

Week 2

9/15. Introduction: Constructing and De-Constructing History in the Western Tradition
Core Readings:

Supplementary:
- Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Penn State UP, 1992)

**Week 3**

**9/22. National History  (Guest: Prof. Chris Capozzola, MIT)**

Core Reading:
- Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen*

Supplementary:
Week 4

9/29. Beyond the Nation: The Case of Atlantic History

Core Readings:
- Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700 (Stanford UP, 2006), all.

Supplementary:
- Alfred Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Greenwood Press, 1972)
- Bernard Bailyn, Atlantic History: Concept and Contours (Harvard UP, 2005).
- J.H. Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830 (Yale UP, 2006), all.
- Paul d’Arcy, People of the Sea: Environment, Identity and History in Oceania (Hawai’i UP, 2006)
- Milo Kearney, The Indian Ocean in World History (Routledge, 2004)

Week 5

10/6. Global History: Economic and Demographic (Guest: Prof. Anne McCants, MIT)

Core Readings:
- Jan de Vries, The Industrious Revolution.

Supplementary:
• James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Myths and Chinese Realities*
• William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*
• Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik: *The World that Trade Created*
• Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1500-1800* (3 vols., especially look at volume 1)
• Charles Tilly, *Huge Structures, Big Comparisons...* (reviews and critiques some of the above works)
• Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*
• K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe*
• Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* [2 vols.]
• M.W. Flinn, *The European Demographic System*
• Massimo Livi-Bacci, *Population and Nutrition*
• Anne McCants, *Civic Charity in a Golden Age: Orphan Care in Early Modern Amsterdam*

**Week 6**

10/13. *No Class – Monday Schedule of Classes*

**Week 7**

10/20. **Microhistory**

Core Readings:
• *David A. Bell, “Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms,”* in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, eds. *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Blackwell, 2002), 262-76.

Supplementary:
• Clifford Geertz, "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight", in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 412-453
• Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre, p. 3-107* [and critiques by Chartier, LaCapra, Mah]
• Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers*
• Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou*
• James Clifford, "Identity in Mashpee", in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.*
• Jonathan Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*

**Week 8**

10/27. **Environmental History** (Guest: Prof. Harriet Ritvo, MIT)

**Core Reading:**

**Supplementary:**
• David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature.*
• William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*
• Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*
• John F. Richards, *The unending frontier: an environmental history of the early modern world,*
• John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*
• Richard White, *The Middle Ground*
• William Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Past of the Chilcotin Plateau* (University of British Columbia Press, 2007)
• "A Round Table: Environmental History", *Journal of American History*, 1990/3

**Week 9**

11/3. **Women’s History and Gender** (Guest: Prof. Elizabeth Wood, MIT)

**Core Readings:**
Supplementary:

- Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*.
- Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women’s Work: the First 20,000 Years*.
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*.
- Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Duke UP, 2001)

**Week 10**


Core Readings:


Supplementary:

- Alfred Cobban *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge UP, 1964)

**Week 11**

11/17. **Historiographical Evolution: Cultural Interpretations of the French Revolution**

Core Reading:

Supplementary:

- Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell UP, 1988)
- Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell UP, 2002)

**Week 12**

11/24. **Individual Consultations with Instructor.**

**Week 13**

12/1. **New Directions in History: Neuro-biology?** (Guest: Prof. Dan Smail, Harvard)

Core Reading:


**Week 14**

12/8. **Class Presentations of Final Projects**

Final Paper Due on December 15