

## History 697C. Philosophy of history: Representation and explanation

University of Massachusetts Amherst  
Fall Semester 1999  
W 9:00–12:00, Herter 214

Prof. Brian W. Ogilvie  
Office: Herter 624  
Phone: (413) 545-1599 office; (413) 585-1051 home (before 10 PM please)  
E-mail: ogilvie@history.umass.edu  
Office hours: TuW 2:00–3:30 PM, and by appointment.

### Brief description of course

In this course we will consider the nature of historical explanation, focusing on narrative and twentieth-century alternatives. In particular, we will examine the nature of temporality in historical accounts, the relation between narrative and the “problem-oriented” history of the Annales school, structure and agency in historical explanation, and the rhetoric and poetics of history. This is **not** a course on research methods but on how historians structure the stories they want to tell based on their research.

I have structured the course around two sets of questions: (1) What characterizes historical narrative? Are all historical accounts narrative in nature? How can concepts from the social sciences be applied to historical narrative? (2) Regardless of their method, do historians represent the past or explain it? Is there a difference between the two? Does the distinction reflect two different kinds of historical practice?

### Course goals

At the end of this course, you should be better able to:

- Understand recent developments in the philosophy of history and speak knowledgeably about them.
- Relate these developments to your own historical interests and writing.
- Reflect critically on the adequacy of historians’ explanations, both your own and those of others.

### Course structure

This course is a seminar. Each meeting will last 2-1/2 to 3 hours with a brief pause about halfway through. Meetings will open with a brief (15 minute max.) presentation of the issues at stake in the week’s readings. Afterwards, we will discuss the readings and the issues. If circumstances warrant, I may give occasional mini-lectures, but these will not be a regular feature of the course.

The seminar format places much of the burden of learning on you and your fellow students. Not preparing for discussions will harm them as well as you. A good graduate course teacher does not tell students what to do or think; he or she guides them in the process of education. Much of my work consists in preparing this syllabus carefully and in identifying issues for discussion.

Discussion serves several purposes. First, it helps clarify difficult or obscure points in the readings. Second, it helps you decide between conflicting positions or to reach a synthesis. Third, it allows me to observe how you approach readings and problems. Fourth, it prepares you for thinking on your feet—an important part of academic life as well as life outside the academy.

I have also set up an electronic mailing list for the course; I will make details available as necessary.

## Requirements and grading

Your grade for this course will be based on the following three requirements:

### 1. Attendance and participation in discussion

For the reasons mentioned above, attendance and participation are crucial for this course. Therefore, I have instituted a draconian policy: you are allowed two absences. If you miss class more than twice, your maximum course grade will be "C" (which, in graduate school, is tantamount to "F"). This policy reflects the importance I attach to discussion.

### 2. In-class presentation(s)

Depending on the number of students who are enrolled in the course, each student will make one or two presentations introducing a seminar meeting. These presentations will set out, briefly, the thesis, argument, and issues in each reading and raise general questions for discussion. They should be ten to fifteen minutes long.

### 3. Four short (10-page) papers

Every three weeks, you will be responsible for a short paper on the course readings. These papers will be due one week after we complete the relevant readings. They will require reflection on the questions that are raised by the readings and will serve to clarify your own positions and to allow me to evaluate your ability to sustain refined analysis.

The final course grade will be balanced among these three elements, with the most weighting going to the short papers. A rough breakdown is as follows:

Short papers—60%

Attendance and participation—25%

Presentation—15%

If necessary, however, I will re-weight the elements of the course *to your advantage*. Grades in graduate courses reflect my professional assessment of your achievements as an apprentice historian. Here is a rough key to their interpretation:

A.....good to excellent

AB.....acceptable to good

B.....marginal to acceptable

BC.....unacceptable to marginal

C.....unacceptable

In addition to the grade, you will receive written comments at the end of the semester reflecting my assessment.

## Books for course

The following books are available at Food For Thought Books (106 N. Pleasant St., Amherst, 253-5432). I have included the ISBNs in case you want to order your books elsewhere; I encourage you to support local booksellers. If you buy all the books, they will cost about \$165 (plus sales tax). If you do not buy a book, you should take careful notes on it.

Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. Originally published 1966. (ISBN 0-385-05898-5, paper, \$12)

Danto, Arthur C. *Narration and knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. (ISBN 0-231-06117-X, paper, \$20)

Fay, Brian, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann, eds. *History and theory: Contemporary readings*. Malden, Mass., and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. (ISBN 0-631-20953-0, paper, \$30)

Giddens, Anthony. *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979. (ISBN 0-520-03975-0, paper, \$17)

Jenkins, Keith. *On "What is history?": From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. (ISBN 0-415-09725-8, paper, \$19)

- Maier, Charles S. *The unmasterable past: History, Holocaust, and the German national identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988. (ISBN 0-674-92976-4, paper, \$12)
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The advantage and disadvantage of history for life*. Trans. Peter Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980. (ISBN 0-915144-94-8, paper, \$5)
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. (ISBN 0-691-02016-7, paper, \$18)
- Stern, Fritz, ed. *The varieties of history: From Voltaire to the present*. Revised ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1973. (ISBN 0-394-71962-X, paper, \$17)
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Revised ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. (ISBN 0-19-520469-7, paper, \$15)

### Course schedule with readings

**N.B.** Readings from the above list of books for the course are indicated by author's name, except for Fay, Pomper, and Vann, which is abbreviated "HTCR." For other readings I have given the full citation.

#### **Sept. 8            Introduction**

What is history?  
 What is historiography?  
 Why philosophy of history?

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#### **Sept. 15          Correspondence theories and the linguistic turn**

What is philosophy? What might it contribute to historians' understanding of their enterprise? Is the goal of history to represent the past or to explain it, and how significant is the difference between the two?

Required reading:

Rorty, pp. 3-13, 131-311.  
 HTCR, introduction.  
 Stern, pt. I §§1-3 (Voltaire, Niebuhr, Ranke), pt. I §12 (Mommsen).  
 Williams, "History," "Philosophy," "Pragmatic."

Suggested reading:

Rorty, pp. 17-127.  
 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968).  
 Peter Winch, *The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

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#### **Sept. 22          History, science, laws, and explanation**

What notion of science is involved in "scientific history"? Do historical explanations share a common form with scientific explanations?

Required reading:

Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an evidential paradigm," in *Clues, myths, and the historical method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore:

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96-125. **[Handout]**  
Stern, pt. I §§8-11 (Buckle and Droysen; Marx and Engels, Jaurès; prefaces;  
Fustel de Coulanges), pt. I §14 (Bury), pt. II §1 (Trevelyan).  
Williams, "Determine," "Development," "Evolution," "Materialism,"  
"Rational," "Science," "Theory."

Suggested reading:

Nancy Cartwright, *How the laws of physics lie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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**Sept. 29      Historical narration**

Is narrative the fundamental form of history? If so, what are the implications of this form for historical explanation?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 13-56.

Danto, pp. 112-363.

Suggested reading:

Danto, pp. ix-111.

François Furet, "From narrative history to problem-oriented history," in *In the workshop of history*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

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**Oct. 6      The Rhetoric of History**

\*\*\* FIRST PAPER DUE \*\*\*

How do historians use rhetorical devices? Are any of them peculiar to history?  
How does the rhetoric of history affect historians' claims to offer adequate explanations of the past?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 57-118.

Stern, pt. I §5 (Macaulay).

Suggested reading:

Anthony Grafton, *The footnote: A curious history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Ronald H. Carpenter, *History as rhetoric: Style, narrative, and persuasion* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

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**Oct. 13      NO CLASS (Monday class schedule in effect)**

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**Oct. 20**      **But is it true?**

Can historians defend the truth of their claims? What is meant by “truth” in this case?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 119-171.

Stern, pt. II §7 (Beard).

Williams, “Creative,” “Fiction,” “Myth,” “Realism.”

Suggested reading:

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The representation of reality in Western literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

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**Oct. 27**      **Postmodernism’s ugly head**

What is postmodernism? How has it affected history? What is at stake in arguments between postmodern philosophers of history and their opponents?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 173-222.

Jenkins (entire book).

Suggested reading:

Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

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**Nov. 3**      **“Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner”? The Holocaust**

\*\*\* SECOND PAPER DUE \*\*\*

Is explanation the same as exculpation? What are the benefits and limits of comparative history?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 223-250.

Maier (entire book).

Suggested reading:

*Forever in the shadow of Hitler? Original documents of the Historikerstreit, the controversy concerning the singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993).

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi assault on humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1993).

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**Nov. 10**      **Categories: Gender, for example**

What categories do historians use in their analyses? Can historians use these

categories unreflectively?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 251-296.

Isabel V. Hull, "Feminist and gender history through the literary looking glass: German historiography in postmodern times," *Central European History* 22, no. 3/4 (1989): 279-300. **[Handout.]**

Stern, pt. I §4 (Thierry), pt. II §5 (Huizinga), pt. II §12 (Braudel).

Williams, "Bourgeois," "Civilization," "Class," "Culture," "Family," "Generation," "Racial," "Regional," "Revolution," "Sex," "Society."

Suggested reading:

David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' fallacies: Toward a logic of historical thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

**Nov. 17**

**Structures**

What can social science do for historians? How can social scientific analyses of social structure be related to the historian's fundamental concern, how things change over time?

Required reading:

Giddens, pp. 1-164.

William H. Sewell, Jr., "A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (no. 1, July 1992): 1-29. **[Handout.]**

Stern, pt. II §6 (Unwin & Clapham), pt. II §9 (Cochran & Hofstadter), pt. II §13 (Perkin).

Williams, "Formalist," "Structural."

Suggested reading:

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Stephen Turner, *The social theory of practices: Tradition, tacit knowledge, and presuppositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Marshall Sahlins, *Historical metaphors and mythical realities: Structure in the early history of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

**Nov. 24**

**Agency**

How can individual human agency be understood in relation to large-scale social structures and transformations? Is there a middle ground between "great man" history and the history of the masses?

Required reading:

Giddens, pp. 165-259.

Berger and Luckmann (entire book).

Stern, pt. I §6 (Carlyle), pt. II §2 (Berr only), pt. II §10 (Namier).

Williams, "Dialectic," "Experience," "Idealism," "Mediation,"  
"Unconscious."

Suggested reading:

Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, trans. Richard Nice  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), esp. chapters 2 and 4.

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**Dec. 1            Objectivity: A noble dream?**

\*\*\* THIRD PAPER DUE \*\*\*

What is meant by "historical objectivity"? Is it the same to claim that a historical account is objective and that it is true? Does objectivity have a value as a goal even if it is unattainable?

Required reading:

*HTCR*, pp. 297-403.

Stern, pt. II §2 (Acton only), pt. II §4 (Meinecke), pt. II §15 (Woodward).

Williams, "Subjective."

Suggested reading:

Peter Novick, *That noble dream: The "objectivity question" and the American historical profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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**Dec. 8            Past and present; or, What is it all for, anyway?**

How does history relate to present concerns? Can one reconcile the desire to participate in present discourse with the desire to explain the past as accurately as possible? How does the distinction between representing and explaining relate to this question?

Required reading:

Nietzsche (entire book).

Stern, pt. I §13 (Turner), pt. II §3 (Robinson & Beard), pt. II §8 (Pokrovsky, Frank, and Müller).

Rorty, pp. 315-394.

Suggested reading:

Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, eds., *Historical literacy: The case for history in American education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the truth about history* (New York: Norton, 1994).

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**Dec. 15            \*\*\* FINAL PAPER DUE \*\*\***