Historiography: The History of History

Course Description

The cultural function of the modern historian is to teach us how to learn from people with whom we differ due to historical circumstances (and these circumstances include the range of ideological commitments they can profess with plausibility). We “go back” to the people of the past in the hope of changing our perspective on the present, and thus multiplying our choices about the future. But these people with whom we differ, and from whom we must learn, are, to begin with, *other historians*; for there is no way to peek over the edges of our existence as if they aren’t there, standing between us and the archive, telling us how to approach it.

How did this happen? Why did human beings acquire historical consciousness? How does it work, what have they done with it? And when did the professional historians—the priests, shamans, scribes, jurists, ministers, librarians—get in the way of the past as such?

This course is designed to answer these questions. We begin by asking, What is History? Even more rudimentary questions immediately become practical—for example, what is an *event*, and what kind of artifact qualifies as a *document* that will secure the intellectual status of an event? Then we turn to *narrative,* another basic element of History as we know it. Here our questions are, How and when did narrative history become the gold standard in reporting on past events? Then, why is narrative form still so important in the representation of historical reality?

The sequence of events as we experience it in real time is not quite random, but it is surely meaningless. For real events don’t possess the formal attributes of stories, with beginnings, middles, ends, and morals—real events just happen. We live forward, but we understand backward: our discrete experiences make sense to us only when they have to, and only because we place them in the ongoing story of our lives. In this sense, narrative is a less realistic way of representing reality than mere chronicle, where it’s one damn thing after another. In view of how real events actually unfold, you could say that abject silence is more realistic than yet another story. So again, why is narrative so important in the representation of historical reality?

The first half of the course will take up these questions, with the assistance of Hayden White and Karl Lowith plus some essays by Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin and excerpts from Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1957). Here our focus will be what we used to call the “philosophy of history.” The second half will consist of a case study in historiographical renovation centered on an examination of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, using W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*(1935) as our foil in recounting historiographical changes ca. 1915 to the present. We’ll conclude by comparing D.W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation” (1915) to Steven Spielberg’s “Lincoln” (2013) as historiographical statements or artifacts.

The required books are just three, but they’ll be supplemented by on-line interviews, documents, and excerpts. They are:

Hayden White, The Content of the Form (1987)

Karl Lowith, Meaning in History (1949)

W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 1860-1880 (1935)

COURSE OUTLINE

PART I: What Is History?

Week 1 (Jan 21-24): Introduction to the Course

READ: Hannah Arendt, “The Concept of History”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Week 2 (Jan 28-31)

READ: Lowith, Meaning in History, Introduction

White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”

Week 3 (Feb 4-7)

READ: Lowith, chaps. 3, 11

G.W.F. Hegel, “Introduction” to The Philosophy of History

Week 4 (Feb 11-14)

READ: Lowith, chap. 2

Karl Marx, “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” [Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic], in Collected Works (1975), Vol. 3, pp. 326-46

Week 5 (Feb 18-21)

READ: Lowith, chap. 9

Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, chap. 3, “The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres”

Week 6 (Feb 25-28)

READ: Lowith, Appendix II

Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History”

PART 2: The Politics of History

Week 7 (Mar 4-7)

READ: White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation”

W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, chap. 2

Week 8 (Mar 11-14)

READ: Howard K. Beale, “On the Rewriting of Reconstruction History,” AHR 45 (1940): 807-27

William A. Dunning, “Truth in History” (1913), Presidential Address to AHA

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Week 9 (Spring Break)

Week 10 (Mar 25-28)

READ: Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, chaps. 1-4

Week 11 (Apr 1-4)

READ: Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, chaps. 5-17

Week 12 (Apr 8-11)

READ: Excerpts from Stampp, Foner, Hahn, ca. 1967-2004 on Reconstruction

Week 13 (Apr 15-18)

READ: “Birth of a Nation”

Week 14 (Apr 22-25)

READ: “Lincoln”

Week 15 (Apr 29-May 2)