New York University  
Department of History

V57.0633        Spring, 2009  
Monday, 2:00-4:45    Prof. Thomas Bender

Writing American History  
An Inquiry into Historiography, Intellectual History, Style, and Methods of  
American Historical Writing

This course will explore the history of history writing in the United States, examining national histories written in the 19th and 20th centuries—as part of American intellectual history. Theme, interpretation, points of view, style in the work of past historians will be the focus. The course then is at once a historiographical investigation and an intellectual history focused particularly on those American intellectuals who were historians. Readings will include three kinds of works: critical historical studies of historians as intellectuals; the actual works of major historians as primary sources in intellectual history, and materials related to scholarly practice as preparation of course papers. Students will discuss the readings and when drafts are ready for presentation they will read and discuss each other’s work.

Each student will be required to do an original research project on a historical text or historian, using a particular work of history or historian’s oeuvre as the principal primary source, supplemented by both additional primary sources as relevant and secondary literature. These papers should be between 15 to 20 pages.

Class meetings will discuss assigned historical texts, sometimes as small group discussions on those weeks marked by an asterisk (*). There will be short response papers (no less than one page, no more than two pages) for readings in weeks marked by #.

The readings and discussions will address, among other things, the education of historians, the state of historical methodologies in different periods, interpretations, relation to public life, relation (in terms of both method and interpretation) to historical debates in the past and the present. Portions of class meetings will be devoted to more practical issues of researching and writing histories oneself, along with student presentations. Because precise language is often important in interpreting texts, you should bring the actual books or print outs for each week to class, as we will be discussing them and making specific reference to these texts.

A Note on Academic Honesty: Intellectual integrity is the foundation of academic life. Plagiarism is the greatest possible violation of the academic ethic, and will be punished. Carelessness is not an excuse. One cannot claim or imply ownership to the work of other people. Poor note-taking can result in plagiarism as can rushing to finish. Give yourself
time to take proper and clear notes, with all language taken from other scholars clearly indicated. And give yourself time to digest the ideas of others on whose work you rely to distill it into your own thinking and language. When in doubt please check with me.

Grading
Class participation (40%): A seminar is a collective learning experience, which makes everyone’s engagement and contributions essential. Discussions are a way of clarifying readings, but also an opportunity for each student to advance their own interpretations and shape the discussion.

Response papers (20%): The response papers are an opportunity to collect your thoughts on the readings, clarify the major points of the reading, and those points in the reading that you find most useful for your own thinking. They also prepare you for substantial participation in the class discussion.

Final Paper (40%). The most important single product of the course will be your own research paper. All the others parts of the course—though much else is learned from them—are intended to prepare you to write a research paper. Major elements of the grade will be based on the clearness of the statement of issues being considered, your ability to show the significance of the questions pursued, the overall organization, the effective use of evidence of primary sources and deployment of secondary works, and clarity and effectiveness of writing. Proper form and proof reading are also essential parts of a strong paper. Oral presentation of historical scholarship is also an important skill, and the last two meetings will be devoted to your oral presentation of the principal point of your paper (which will be previously distributed to the class).

Paper topics should be discussed with me by February 8.
Research Proposals will be due in class and discussed March 22.
What is expected in a proposal will be discussed in class, but briefly you should establish the historical issue you are investigating, what is significant about it that warrants examination, and are the historical question(s) you will be asking. It should also include an indication of the major secondary works of scholarship that bear upon it, and a discussion of the primary sources you will be using. By this point you should also be able to indicate tentative conclusions and themes. Perhaps another way of phrasing what is needed at this point is Your Subject, Your Angle, The Framing of the Question and Answer(s), and the Take Away. They need not be more than two pages.

Questions of Form: Most of the standard rules on form and citation are covered in A Pocket Guide to Writing in History; if there are issues not covered there, the place to go is the Chicago Manual of Style, available in the bookstore, the library, or on line: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html. Kate Turabian was the original author of the Chicago Manual of Style, and her short and updated version is available as A Manual for Writers of Term Papers....(2007)
Required Books (available in NYU Bookstore)
Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913)

Outline for course (subject to change)

**B = on Blackboard**

Week 1, January 25: Introduction to the course

Week 2#, February 1: Historiography and Intellectual History

Week 3#, February 8: History’s Work
Part I
Reading: John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*.

Part II
Formulating a Research Question
Primary Sources and Secondary Sources
Framing a research paper
Reading: Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, pp. 43-60

Week 4#, February 15: Being a Historian:

Part II The Objectivity Question
Reading: James Kloppenberg, “Objectivity and Historians: A Century of Historical Writing,” *American Historical Review*, 1010-1030. JSTOR
Week 5, February 22
Part I (2:00-3:00)
Historical Methods/Writing
[Bring to class one of the response papers you have done and revise in class in view of Strunk and White and then explain reasons for revisions]

Part II (3:00-4:45)
Class in Library: Research Resources

Week 6#: March 1
Writing About Historians

Week 7#: March 8
Romantic History

SPRING BREAK (March 15-20)

Week 8*: March 22
The American Revolution and the New Nation
Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), selected pages

Week 10: March 29
Presentation of Prospectuses

Week 11*: April 5
Reconstruction
Reading: William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* (1907), chaps. VII (109-123) and XIII (203-19)
Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (1990), 35-54
Part II: Optional Viewing and Discussion: D.W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Week 12*: April 19
Locating Women in History

Week 13: April 26
Presentation of research papers

Week 14: May 3
Presentation of research papers