

Rhode Island College

600 Mt. Pleasant Ave

History 161

Western History

Course Introduction

This course explores the evolution of European society from the Hebrews to the contemporary world. It focuses on selected themes central to the lives of western peoples and serves as an introduction to critical thinking and skills.

Why Study History?

What is history, and what does it mean to us as individuals? This is not an easy question to answer, and one of the most important goals of this course is to give you some idea of why the study is important to you as a person, and as a citizen.

History helps provide each of us with an identity. We live with people who are older than we and who provide us with knowledge and experience from past eras. They themselves learned from others before them, and we will teach still others who follow us. Together, the members of our society provide memories that stretch far into the past. And, of course, these people have many different kinds of experiences and memories. They are members of different ethnic and racial groups, speak different languages, practice different cultures, and hold different moral beliefs. Thus, each of us is connected to the past in ways that are both similar and different. We are all humans, and we all share certain aspects of family, political, and personal life. At the same time, these experiences vary for each of us. And we are connected to the past in ways that are, at times, dramatically dissimilar. History is most interesting when we focus on its astonishing variety. Historians seek to understand both the similarities and differences between groups and individuals.

One of the most important goals of history is to help us identify with and understand people who have lived at other times and in different places. We must learn to put ourselves in their shoes, to understand what it meant for them to work in a nineteenth-century factory, to face death from the plague, or to confront a difficult moral decisions, such as that faced by the members of the Donner Party in the famous nineteenth-century cannibalism case. If we can better understand these differences in the past we will be better able to do so in our world. In this way, history is very much like many of the novels we read or the popular songs we listen to – it helps us enlarge our perspectives on the world, to expand our experiences beyond those we confront in our everyday lives. And in doing so, it will help us in our attempts to make sense of our lives.

Occasionally, history can provide us with specific lessons that we can apply to particular problems. But history does not “repeat itself;” we cannot learn exactly what to do by studying similar situations in the past and attempts to do so can lead to disaster. History is not governed by laws that we can somehow uncover and thus use to predict the future. People behave differently in various situations, and the individual can often make a crucial difference in determining the course of events. But by seeking to understand the causes of past events, history can help us to untangle the complex issues that face the world today.

Above all, history tells a story. It places events in some sort of order, with particular regard to chronology. The importance of chronology becomes obvious when we change the order in which things have happened. Note the story Bob Dylan tells in the following song:

“Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” EXCERPTS

I.

I was riding on the Mayflower
When I thought I spied some land
I yelled for Captain Ahab
I have yuh understand
Who came running to the deck

II.

“I think I’ll call it America”
I said as we hit land
I took a deep breath
I fell, down, I could not stand
Captain Ahab he started

Said, "Boys, forget the whale
Look on over yonder
Cut the engines
Change the sail
Haul on the bowline"
We sang that melody
Like all tough sailors do
When they are far away at sea

III.

Well, I rapped upon a house
With the U.S. flag upon display
I said, "Could you help me out
I got some friends down the way"
The man says, "Get out of here
I'll tear you limb from limb"
I said, "You know they refused Jesus, too"
He said, "You're not Him
Get out of here before I break your bones
I ain't your pop"
I decided to have him arrested
And I went looking for a cop

V.

Well, I got back and took
The parkin' ticket off the mast
I was ripping it to shred
When this coastguard boat went past
They asked me my name
And I said, "Captain Kidd"
They believed me but
They wanted to know
What exactly that I did
I said for the Pope of Eruke

Writing up some deeds
He said, "Let's set up a fort
and start buying the place with beads"
Just then this cop comes down the street
Crazy as a loon
He throws us all in jail
For carryin' harpoons

IV.

I repeated that my friends
Were all in jail, with a sigh
He gave me his card
He said, "Call me if they die"
I shook his hand and said goodbye
Ran out to the street
When a bowling ball came down the road
And knocked me off my feet
A pay phone was ringing
It just about blew my mind
When I picked it up and said hello
This came through the line

VI.

I was employed
They let me go right away
They were very paranoid
Well, the last I heard of Ahab
He was stuck on a whale
That was married to the deputy
Sheriff of the jail
But the funniest thing was
When I was leavin' the bay
I saw three ships a0sailin'
They were all heading my way
I asked the captain what his name was
And how come he didn't drive a truck
He said his name was Columbus
I just said, "Good Luck."

Many historians would argue that this song is indeed great literature; it is not, however, great history. Why not?

What Do Historians Study?

The word history refers to two different things: what actually happened in the past and what historians have written about those events. Today more than ever, historians seek to investigate every aspect of the past – people, events, and ideas of all sorts. Go into any large bookstore and scan the titles in the history section; you will see books on just about any aspect of the human experience that you can think of. Thus, there are many different kinds of history. Some of the oldest include political history, diplomatic history or the history of foreign policy, biography, the history of ideas, immigration history, urban history, labor history, and economic history. Within the past few decades, though, historians have opened many new fields of study, particularly in the broad, general area of social history. Such new fields include women’s history, African-American history, cultural history, the history of mentalities, and quantitative history. Historians have become particularly interested in studying the everyday life of ordinary people at home, at work, and in the community. Because of this new research, the history you are studying is probably very different from that which your parents and grandparents learned.

A good example is the unusual story of a man named Domenico Scandella, also known as Menocchio, a miller who lived in the village of Montereale in Italy during the second half of the sixteenth century. The historian Carlo Ginzburg, doing research on a religious sect whose members were accused of being witches by the Catholic Inquisition accidentally stumbled upon Menocchio’s story. The miller was one of the few people of his village who could read, but his understanding of the books was much different than what the authors intended. Drawing upon the popular, oral culture that had long dominated the region, Menocchio created his own confused, unique religious system, one that attacked the wealth and power of the church, denied the divinity of Christ, rejected the idea of original sin, and supported religious toleration, all beliefs that the Catholic church condemned at the time, but beliefs that reflected the popular discontent with the church’s role in society. However, his most startling idea concerned the creation of the world. In the beginning, he said, “all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed just as cheese is made out of milk and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels, there was also God, the too having been created out of that mass at the same time...” Menocchio was tried twice by the Inquisition, and eventually burned at the stake as a heretic in 1599.

Menocchio’s story provides us insights into the clash between the region’s oral tradition, Menocchio’s own partial literacy, and the high culture of the Catholic Church, and the resultant effect on an ordinary person’s life.

Primary Sources

Historians gather their information by studying what we call primary sources, the “raw material” of history. The kinds of primary sources are almost endless and include both published and unpublished materials. The following are just a few examples: official records kept by governments, like birth and death records and census reports; the records of a political party or group; publications like newspapers and magazines; personal accounts like autobiographies; and literature and works of art and music. As historians have become more interested in material culture, they have also begun to look at things like tools and technology as a way of understanding people’s daily lives. Which material an historian studies often depends upon the kind of history that he or she is

writing. Family historians, for instance, are interested not only in diaries and memoirs, but also in demographic data – birth and death records – and official documents like deeds, wills, and court records. What do you think they can learn from such documents?

Of course, historians cannot simply reproduce all of the material they research – just to write the history of a single town for a single day would take thousands of pages! The historian would have to study the activities of every government and private institution, trace every action taken by every individual, and analyze the ideas and events detailed in every publication. Historians must therefore be selective in their use of sources; they must develop a rationale for selecting certain material, and leaving out other information. They must have a question or objective beyond that of simple description.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are accounts of an event or an era by someone who was not there and does not have first-hand knowledge of those events. Historians investigate the primary materials they believe are most useful and then try to reconstruct an event or understand its causes or legacy. Students are often curious as to why there are so many secondary studies that talk about different aspects of the same subject. Are not a few studies on a particular subject enough? One answer to this is to understand that our perspectives and the questions we pose change. Each new generation of students is motivated by different questions that often require fresh examinations of the primary materials and then the writing of new secondary sources. For instance, many historians who grew up in the aftermath of the 1960s, known for civil rights and freedom struggles, have come to focus their attention on the historical struggles of people who have been overlooked in history such as women African-Americans, immigrants, and workers. As a result, those people known as social historians are busy taking a second look at the past by employing new questions that target how common people lived and worked rather than the more standards examination of politics or economics.

Perspective

All historical works, both primary and secondary, contain a perspective or bias. All historians bring a particular point of view to their research and to their writing. While we do not do this intentionally it is out very identities – as women, men, old, young, black, white, democratic, socialist, pacifist, conservative, urban, rural, religious – that often determine a particular interest or set of priorities that we apply to our work.

Having a bias does not mean that the document or the secondary source lacks any value or insight. It does mean, however, that as readers we would be mistaken to take each source or each study as the final truth about that particular event in history. Instead we evaluate each source by considering the authors bias or perspective. Moreover, the prevalence of bias encourages us to abandon the idea that there is one set of truths about every single historical moment or issue, and helps us to see that there exist dozens of different perspectives. Once we recognize bias we are better armed to weigh the value of each source and write history for ourselves. The following are some examples that will clarify the issue of bias.

1. If you wanted to learn about factory work in mid-nineteenth century Britain would the diaries, letter, and records of factory owners and foremen be helpful? Would they tell you about how workers experienced their day, about their standards of living? About unemployment? or would their writings be concerned with other issues? If they did address issues of long hours, low pay, and the prevalence of child labor, would they be speaking from experience on the factory floor as workers or as bosses?

2. The R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company has a museum at its corporate headquarters in Durham, North Carolina on the history of tobacco. What would you expect to find in such a museum? What would be the perspective of the museum's creators on smoking and tobacco? Would it answer questions about the controversy over public smoking? Would it contain information about the health hazards of smoking? What valuable information could the museum provide on these topics?
3. At a recent convention of the American Historical Association, outside official headquarters, a nicely dressed young man handed out pamphlets. The title of one read "The 'Liberation of the Camps': Facts v. Lies," published by the Institute for Historical Review. The document asserts that the deaths of inmate in Nazi concentration camps occurred because of inmate violence against one another and the spread of infectious diseases. It concludes that the systematic extermination of Jews never happened. In light of overwhelming contradictory evidence, such as eyewitness testimonies about mass executions and gas chambers and the confession of Nazi officials, where does the evidence cited in this pamphlet come from? What is the motive behind the research conducted by this institute?
4. One last example helps to point out the dangers of accepting interpretations without paying attention to the source. Many Americans have come to refer to President John F. Kennedy's administration in the early 1960s as Camelot, meaning that it was an idyllic moment in American political history. Many historians ask what was idyllic about a Presidency that saw the acceleration of American involvement in the Vietnam War and the Cuban missile crisis? Where would such a term have originated and what would have been the intention? It turns out that the term was coined by Mrs. Kennedy after her husband's assassination. In that light, how historically useful is the term Camelot? What does it tell us about Mrs. Kennedy?

THEMES

Because this is a one semester course, it will concentrate on certain themes rather than attempt to present a traditional survey of the material. These themes highlight particular aspects of past experiences, those that appear over and over during the 3,000 years of human history and have relevance to today's world. Your instructor will use some or all of the following themes, and perhaps others, as a means to study Western Civilization.

1. MYTH, FAITH AND BELIEF

Humans, individually and collectively, search for meaning in their lives. As a result, most civilizations establish some form of belief structure. Over the course of Western Civilization, societies have adopted myths, organized religions, or philosophical systems to answer the great questions of life. All forms provide guidance for behavior in this world and some even promise an afterlife. This theme offers insights into myths, faiths, and beliefs prevalent since the ancient world.

2. ORDER AND AUTHORITY

Whenever humans live together, they seek to organize their world. At the most basic level, they form families. When humans group themselves into larger societies, they select individuals and institutions to wield the authority that created order. The central focus of this theme is the study of these structures, who has the power and how they employ it. How do families reflect this use of power? How have dissatisfied people expressed their feelings about an authority structure that does not respond to their needs? Often different models of authority and order coexist, sometimes peacefully sometimes not.

3. EXPANSION AND CULTURAL CONTACT

Periodically, Europeans have reached beyond their borders to seek various challenges. Through colonization, wars, and exploration in search of wealth and fame, they have spread their cultures to the four corners of the globe. This theme explores Europeans' contact with other peoples and the resulting political, economic and social relations. At times, ideas and goods have been exchanged, while on other occasions, Europeans have dominated the encountered civilizations. The study of this interaction is a critical issue for understanding Western Civilization.

4. LIVING IN THE NATURAL WORLD: WORK, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

To survive, humans must work to provide for themselves. They can work as individuals or as a group, manually or with the aid of machines. Who gives the orders and who does the work explains a great deal about a particular society. This theme explores the nature of human labor and its transformation over time. It also illustrates how work shapes family and community relations. Finally, the changing nature of work has dramatically altered humanity's relationship with the physical environment.

5. CUSTOM, CULTURE AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

All civilizations develop norms for what is considered proper behavior and what is aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable. Traditionally, culture has been associated with the elite who patronized the arts and set the tone for what was considered good taste. While this is indeed a critical part of culture, it is also important to consider what ordinary people regarded as proper and enjoyable. This theme explores high and popular culture at various times throughout the span of Western Civilization.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT AND EXPECTATIONS

Many issues in history are controversial. It is expected when individuals have different views on a subject; they will be able to share them with others. People may agree to disagree on something, but it will be done so in a respectful manner. This applies to the instructor and individual students and student to student.

Students are expected to be on time for class and remain for its duration. Cell phones, pagers and the like should be shut off during class. Food should not be consumed during class.

Academic honesty is expected of all students. They will do specific assignments without the aid of others; however, group study or review sessions are encouraged. If anyone is caught cheating on exams and papers, he/she will receive an F for the course and evidence of the cheating will be filed with the History Department chair and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. If there is a

subsequent infraction, the student will be sent to the Board of College Discipline and face possible expulsion from the college.