Thinking History

Debates and Developments in Historiography from the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Twenty-First Century

Aims and Objectives

This is a course that proposes to take an historical approach to the difficult but fascinating subject of Historiography. Its aim is to provide students with a survey of the principal movements and debates which have shaped historical research and writing over the past eighty years or so. Though the approach will be largely chronological, a principal aim of the course is to introduce students at once to the major theoretical and methodological problems which continue to confront historians in their everyday work, and to present them with the opportunity of examining some of the classic texts of modern historical writing.
Learning Outcomes:

This course will expose students to the history of historical thought and writing in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

On successful completion of this module students should be able to demonstrate that they have acquired the ability

- to order the main developments in historical theory and practice in Europe and North America in the twentieth and early twenty-first century.
- to assess the significance of the major trends in modern historiography.
- to evaluate the critical turning points in historiographical theory and practice.
- to engage critically with the most influential books and articles pertaining to the subject.
- to present a coherent summary and assessment of the historical debates and controversies relating to the subject.
- to interpret with key primary documents in the light of the political, social, intellectual and cultural contexts of the period.
- to interact with and apply key analytical and theoretical models available for the subject.
- to demonstrate a continuing engagement with the latest developments and outstanding problems in the interpretation of the subject.
- to present a critical discussion of specific topics selected for analysis within the subject.
- to present a comparative assessment and evaluation of contributions to the wider debates on historical method and philosophy.
- to demonstrate a written mastery of a range of general issues raised by recent theoretical challenges to the status and value of history writing.

Some Definitions

What is historiography?

Historiography n. 1. the writing of history. 2. the study of history-writing.

History is a complex and misleading word. It connotes both the past that the historian studies and the exercise of investigating analysing and writing about that past. This complexity is sometimes lost on us, and in practice we frequently neglect the artificial, creative nature of history writing. We mistake the art for the fact, and forget that the historical past, however straightforward it may seem, is not plain truth, but is always ‘constructed’ by the person who writes about it. For these reasons historians
often use the term *historiography* specifically to denote the conscious act of writing history and of thinking about how history is written.

**Thinking about how history is written**

Historical construction, good and bad, takes place in several stages. Gradually, by selecting and reading sources, by assessing the value and the relevance of disparate and often conflicting evidence, by engaging with other historical writers and interpretations the historian pieces together an understanding, an explanation and (ultimately) an interpretation of past societies and events. But each of these easily summarised stages is replete with inherent problems. What sources should the historian use? What sort of evidence is convincing? Which documents should be read, and how many? How are previous interpretations and perspectives to be weighed? Which interpretative concepts work best? Which subjects are worth investigating in the first place, and on what ground is this selection and that approach based? Can history writing be objective, should the writer even try to be free of value judgement? Can historians erase their own assumptions, social attitudes and prejudices before beginning this series of intricate tasks? Or should they frankly declare them and use them overtly in their historical interpretations and arguments?

It is to explore such questions about how historians have tried to write history that this course has been designed. By introducing students to the wide variety of perspectives, methods and concepts by which historians actually approach the task of making sense of the past, it seeks to provide practical and usable answers to the theoretical problems inherent in History as a form of knowledge. And by focussing discussion on texts that have exercised a major influence in the development of these perspectives over the past century it hopes to provide students with a sense of the breadth and richness of contemporary historical writing.

**What is postmodernism?**

In recent years one of the most serious challenges to the integrity and to the very status of history writing as a respectable form of study and thought has come from a variety of critical and theoretical perspectives which have been grouped under the complex and exceedingly slippery theoretical construct of *Postmodernism*. Postmodernism is a term used to designate a multitude of trends—in the arts,
philosophy, literary theory, historical discourse and many other areas—that come after and deviate from the many 20th-century movements that constituted modernism. The term, now ubiquitous in contemporary discourse, has been employed as a catchall for various aspects of society, theory, and art. Central to it, however, is a rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual – in particular the authoritative composer of a text - and a corresponding emphasis upon the contingent, collective, anonymous and sometimes anarchic nature of cognitive experience, that is of the way in which we perceive and get to know the world. In practice, the Postmodernist perspective has tended to subvert the notion of a coherent text or line of argument, to deny the absolute superiority of one way of knowing the world over another (which it sees as ideologically repressive), to blur the distinctions between high and low culture, and as a whole to challenge a wide variety of traditional cultural values.
Some Historians

Marc Bloch

Natalie Zemon Davis

Carlo Ginzburg
Introductory and General Reading


Primary Sources:

Robert M Burns (ed), *Historiography: Critical Concepts* (2006) is a massive four volume collection of key documents in the history of historical writing which lays
particular emphasis on modern trends, methods and controversies, practical and theoretical. Three other anthologies which collect a variety of statements from practicing historians concerning the purposes and problems of their work are Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History*, (3rd ed. 1980), John Cannon (ed.), *The Historian at Work*, (1980) and John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (Longman, 2001).

Lecture List

And

Key to Further reading

Week 1


Week 2

Lecture: The Marxist paradigm and its problems, 1920 - 50

Discussion focus: Elton, Hexter and the ghost of Collingwood

[Reading: Dray; Danto; Mink; Elton; Hexter (a); Carr; Walsh; ** Collingwood; Graham]

Week 3


Discussion focus: Historical materialism: its proponents and critics

[Reading: Marx; Rigby; McClennan; Roth; Hilferding; Dobb; Cohen; Weber; Tawney; Mommsen Kaye; Anderson; Blackburn; Thompson (a); Thompson (b); Stedman-Jones; Abrams;]

** For full titles, see Recommended Reading below
Week 4


Discussion focus: Interpreting the French revolution

[Reading: Burke (a); Burke (b); Carrard; Bloch; Braudel (a); Braudel (b); Doyle; Soboul; Furet]

Week 5


Discussion focus: Slavery and Race in the Americas

[Reading: Novick; Sternsher; Fogel; Fogel & Engerman; Genovese; Levine]

Week 6

Lecture: New Directions (1) Anthropology and the emergence of Ethnohistory, 1960 - 2004

Discussion focus: The New Nationalism and the emergence of Postcolonialism

[Reading: Ashcroft; Geertz; Goody; Ranger; Wachtel; Said; Bhabha; Turner; Kennedy]

Week 7

Lecture: New Directions (2): Feminism and the emergence of gender History, 1960 - 2004

Discussion focus: Recovering the lives of medieval and early modern women

[Reading: Carroll; Shoemaker & Vincent; Scott; Bridenthal & Kuntz;]
Week 8


Discussion focus: Recovering mentalités in early modern Europe

[Reading: Hunt; Burke(c); Davis; LeRoyLadurie; Ginzburg; Darnton]

Week 9


Discussion focus: Historians confront the Holocaust

[Reading: Clark; Jenkins (a); Jenkins (b); Kershaw; White; Appelby; La Capra (a); La Capra (b); Lipstadt; Maier; Windshuttle]
List of works keyed in the lecture list

[Though the following texts have been keyed to the topics of lectures and suggested discussions above, they may be read with profit in regard to more general historiographical issues]


Ben-Israel, Hedva, *English Historians on the French Revolution* (1968)

Bhabha, Homi, K, *The Location of Culture* (1994)

Blackburn, Robin (ed), *Ideology in Social Science* (1972)


Braudel, Fernand, (a) *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the Age of Philip II* (Eng. trans., 1972)

Braudel, Fernand, (b) *On History*, (1980)

Bridenthal, Renate & Koontz, Claudia (eds), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (1987)


Burke, Peter (b) *A New Kind of History: from the writings of Lucien Febvre* (1973)

Burke, Peter (c), *Varieties of Cultural History* (1997)

Carrard, Phillipe, *Poetics of the New History: French historians from Braudel to Chartier* (1992)


Elton, G.R. *The Practice of History* (1967)


Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (2nd ed, 1993)


Hexter, J.H. (b) *On Historians* (1979)


Jenkins, Keith (a), *Re-thinking History* (1991)

Jenkins, Keith (b), *On “What is History?”* (1995)


Kennedy, V, *Edward Said*


La Capra, Dominick (a) *History and Criticism* (1985)

La Capra, Dominick (b) *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, (1994)


Levine, Lawrence, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977)

Lipstadt, Deborah, *Denying the Holocaust: the growing assault on History and Memory*, (1993)

McClellan, David, *Marxism after Marx* (1975)

Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*

Mink, Louis et al (eds), *Historical Understanding* (1987)


Roth, G, *Max Weber’s Vision of History*

Rowbotham, Sheila, *Hidden from History* (1973)


Scott, Joan Wallach, *Gender and the Politics of History*

Shoemaker, Robert & Vincent, Mary, *Gender and History in Western Europe* (1988)


Sternsher, Bernard, *Consensus, conflict, and American historians* (1975)

Turner, B.S., *Orientalism*


Thompson, E.P., (a) *The Making of the English Working Class* (1965)

Thompson, E.P., (b) *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978)


Walsh, W.H., *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1950 and sub edns)


**Course Teacher and Co-Ordinator**

The co-ordinator for this course is Prof. Ciaran Brady who is contactable in R 3116 during office hours and at cbrady@tcd.ie.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

Credit allocation for this course is 5 ECTS.
Assessment of this course will take the form of one two-hour examination.

The final lecture in the course will be given on **Wednesday 28th November 2012**

**The examination will take place on Friday 7th December 2012**