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
Modes of delivery
This course will be delivered through nine lectures at 10am on each Monday from the start of term through to Monday 21\textsuperscript{st} March in R 2041B.

In addition three two hour discussion sessions will be held in Week 4, (10am to 12 noon on Tuesday 9\textsuperscript{th} February), Week 8, (10am to 12 noon on Tuesday 8\textsuperscript{th} March), and Week 11, (10am to 12 noon on Tuesday 29\textsuperscript{th} March).

These discussion sessions will all be held in R 4047

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.

Introductory and General Reading


Beverly Southgate, History: What and why? (1996) offers a discussion which, while being sympathetic to the postmodernist critique does not entirely surrender to it; Keith Jenkins, Re-thinking History (1991) does. Three robust rebuttals of the postmodernist


**Primary Sources:**

Lecture List
And
Key to Further reading

Week 1


Discussion focus: Elton, Hexter and the ghost of Collingwood

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

Week 2

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

Discussion focus: Historical materialism: its proponents and critics
[Reading: Marx; Taylor; Rigby; McClennan; Roth; Hilferding; Dobb; Cohen; Weber; Tawney; Fromm; Giddens]

Week 3


Discussion focus: Marxist history writing: its proponents and critics
[Reading: Kaye; Anderson, P (a), (b); 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: Anderson B; 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
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]


Anderson, Perry, (a) *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974)
   (b) *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974)


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)


Fromm, Erich, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961)


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)

McClennan, 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)


Assessment and Evaluation

Credit allocation for this course is 5 ECTS. Assessment of this course will take the form of two essays (approx. 2,000 words each) to be submitted on Monday 29th Feb and Monday 4th April 2016 respectively. A list of essay titles from which two may be chosen follows.

Essay Topics

1. Why did the theoretical arguments of R.G Collingwood fail to influence the practice of historians in the later twentieth century?

2. Assess the degree to which Marxist historians have addressed the critique of historical materialism advanced by Max Weber.
3. To what extent can the methods of the Annales School of French historical writing be related to sociological concepts of structuralism and post-structuralism?

4. Assess the influence of quantitative and statistical methods on the reinterpretation of American political history.

5. ‘The conceptual challenges of women’s history are far more formidable than the evidential ones’ Discuss.

6. Assess the relevance of post-colonial theory for the reinterpretation of the history of empires in the modern world.

7. Is it possible to write a history of human sexuality?

8. Should historians refrain from making explicit moral judgements in their writings?