International History

Academic year 2019–2020

Approaches to Global History

HI118 - Autumn - 6 ECTS
Tuesdays 8.15–10am, S2

Course Description

This seminar offers an overview of recent approaches to, and discussions about, global history. It thus aims to take stock of the much broader global turn in history that has taken place during the last 30 years. By discussing writings and research widely drawn upon by global historians, the seminar provides students with a toolkit for better understanding the turn away from nation-centered ways of seeing history, which have given way to histories focusing on the movements of people, goods, and ideas across boundaries and on how these movements have been determinants of historical change. The seminar situates global history within related fields, such as transnational history and imperial history. Finally, it delves into recent challenges to global history, which in the eyes of some of its critics has given up on some classic virtues of historians altogether. Throughout the seminar, a particular focus will be on the manifestations and implications of Eurocentrism in historical writing.

PROFESSOR

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Office hours
Tuesdays 2–4pm

ASSISTANT

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Tuesdays 10:15–12:15

Syllabus

Course Requirements

1. Term Paper: 50% of final grade; 4,000 words; deadline January 5, 2020 (by email to professor and TA)

Term papers of 4,000 words (including the footnotes, but excluding the bibliography) should deal with a clearly circumscribed historical topic and address a viable research question. Topic and question should be related to migration history, be developed by the student, and discussed in advance with the instructor. For this purpose, students must submit (by email, to professor and TA) a 300-word abstract by October 22, which states the title,
topic, question, and structure of the future paper. This serves as a basis for discussion in the office hour. Once you submitted your abstract please make an appointment here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ECmV28YZ0kGQrTE6_UVThlx8BmjJw2MFyvmGhN6Tzq4/edit#gid=0

For general reference of how to write term papers, please read the guidelines (available on Moodle) carefully. Two sessions will be devoted to academic writing. When in doubt you can also refer to this online guide for writing academic research papers: https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/index.html

2. Book Presentation and Review: 20% of final grade; 800–1,000 words; deadline Friday noon before class presentation.

From the week-by-week list below you must choose one book to present in class and write a review of it. Book reviews are standalone pieces of 800–1,000 words, which should summarize the book’s content (ideally not on a chapter-by-chapter basis, but as a whole), approach, and main arguments in relation to the wider historiography of the relevant topic. They should also contain explicit praise and/or criticism. For reference, please read yourself through the book reviews of the American Historical Review as well as prior reviews of the book that you pick. The reviews must be submitted to all course participants by Friday noon before your presentation of the book. Feedback on the written reviews will be provided in the office hour (ideally together with discussing your abstract, if possible).

The book presentation in class should be concise (7 minutes as an absolute maximum) and refrain from summarizing the book’s content once more, which through your written review will be known to all course participants before your presentation. Rather, it should relate the book’s arguments to the general required reading of the session in which you present the book. Does it support or complement the arguments made in the required reading? In what way? Does it shed a different light on them or contradict them? Your presentation should thus serve as an opener of the discussion rather than as a standalone review.

3. Class Participation: 30% of final grade

Just like an orchestra, a history seminar is only as good as the individual effort of all its participants. Please come to every class equipped with a thorough reading of the assigned texts, prepared answers to the questions that you find below for each session, as well as questions of your own. Make yourself heard in class and we will all benefit as a group.

In order to integrate reading and writing exercises, every student has to write a one-page summary (ca. 400 words) of one item on the list of required readings in one week: students with surnames A–G should summarize Austin for week 2 (September 24), H–P Drayton and Motadel for week 3, and Q–Z Cooper for week 4. These are not graded, should be submitted by email to the TA only, who will provide a brief feedback on them.

Course Structure

1. 17 September: Introduction

Who are we? Distribution of presentations.

Methods and Techniques:

How to prepare and deliver a good presentation. The 5–7-minute rule, brevity, and precision.

2. 24 September: What is Global History?

Topic/Question:

Ever since the term has achieved growing currency in the 1990s, people have asked what global history is. In this session we will discuss this question, without finding a definitive answer with validity for everyone. In particular,
we will discuss whether and how global history is different from other kinds of connected histories, such as transnational history or world history. And: Where, why, and how did global history as an academic sub-discipline take shape and what does this tell us about its main traits?

Required Reading:


Techniques:

Finding, Reading, and Writing Book Reviews

3. 1 October: Is Global History Necessary?

Topic/Question:

Like any other academic sub-field, global history has had its fair share of critics and sceptics. Some of them claim that it is old wine in new bottles; others maintain that it has neglected place and sedentariness in favor of tropes of networks, flux, and mobility; others yet argue that it has “had its moment,” suffering from a sort of imperial overstretch owing to its own success. Whereas last week we discussed what global history is, our topics this week will be whether it is necessary and whether it is a good thing.

Required Reading:


4. 8 October: Globalization in History

Topic/Question:

The rise of global history as a subfield has obviously coincided with the emergence of debates about globalization in social sciences other than history. But is global history simply the history of globalization? Is it useful to speak of globalization for historical periods prior to the twentieth century, as many historians today do? And is the term globalization useful for historians at all? These questions will concern us in this week.

Required Reading:


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


5. **15 October: Writing Term Papers**

Please read carefully the guidelines and come prepared to discuss specific matters that in your eyes arise from these guidelines.

6. **22 October: The Great Divergence**

**Topic/Question:**

From this week onwards, we will now longer deal with the history and theory of global history per se, but instead delve into some of the most prominent topical historical debates that have accompanied and promoted the rise of global history since the 1990s. The first of these is an economic history debate, about the so-called “great divergence” between Europe and China. It essentially seeks to answer the question of why, considering roughly comparable standards of living prior to 1800, (Northwestern) Europe grew so much wealthier and more powerful thereafter, whereas China did not. The American economic historian Kenneth Pomeranz has famously delivered his answer to this question. But is his answer convincing?

**Required Reading:**


**Possible Presentations / Reviews:**


7. 29 October: Slavery and Capitalism

Topic/Question:

As you will have gathered from last week, the eighteenth-century American plantation complex plays a significant, though relatively implicit, role in Pomeranz’s explanation of the industrial revolution in England. Yet how important was this plantation complex, and the system of slavery on which it was based, for capitalism in the United States? Whereas much classic Marxist theory thought of slavery as archaic, feudal, unprofitable, and thus an obsolete obstacle to the nineteenth-century rise of capitalism, dissenters such as the Trinidadian historian (and later Prime Minister) Eric Williams and the American economic historians Stanley Engerman and Robert Fogel shattered this view. After lying dormant for a long time, recent years have seen a resurgence of the debate about capitalism and slavery, particularly in the form of the so-called New History of Capitalism, many proponents of which have argued that slavery was crucial to economic growth in the nineteenth-century U.S. Some economic historians disagree. Who is right?

Required Reading:


Watch

If you have the time watch this lecture: http://www.ehs.org.uk/multimedia/tawney-lecture-2019-slavery-and-anglo-american-capitalism-revisited

Possible Presentations / Reviews:


8. 5 November: Global Intellectual History and Human Rights

Topic/Question:

With its strong literary anchorage and its long-held endearment towards famous (usually white, male) writers, intellectual history was long a bastion of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism, and thus a relative latecomer to the label of the global. But can there be such a thing as a global intellectual history? We will discuss this question based on a particular example this week: the history of human rights. As a markedly universalist idea, do demands for human rights travel better than particularist ideas, such as nationalism?
Required Reading:

Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, “What is Global Intellectual History? …If It Should Exist At All,”: http://imperialglobalexeter.com/2015/02/23/what-is-global-intellectual-history-if-it-should-exist-at-all/#more-1964


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


9. 12 November: Empires and Their Boundaries

Topic/Question:

One attraction of global history has been that other than transnational history or international history it is more obviously capable of encompassing quarters of world history in which the nation-state was not the most important point of reference for political organization—in other words, the overwhelming majority of humanity prior to the twentieth century. For the same reason, global history has revived debates about the relationship between empires and nation-states; notably in the U.S. case, which on the one hand was long seen as a quintessential example of a postcolonial or post-imperial nation-state, yet on the other hand also acted as an imperialist power throughout the twentieth century. How should one write this history?

Required Reading:


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


10. 19 November: Eurocentrism

Topic/Question:

If global history has had a declared enemy it has always been Eurocentrism—a sometimes ill-defined concept that can refer to undue historiographical attention to Europe (and North America?) to the detriment of other world regions, the uncritical use of concepts derived from historical trajectories specific to Europe (and these concepts’ uncritical application elsewhere), and the normative assumption that Europe was somehow superior; or a combination of these three. In this session we will discuss the origins, the interplay, and the escapability of these three varieties of Eurocentrism.

Required Reading:


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


11. 26 November: International History

Topic/Question:

At least in the form of diplomatic history, international history is much older than global history and in some ways has acted as a handmaiden for it. Today we will ask whether there are longer term roots in the history of international relations and organizations that have helped bury Eurocentric notions of history and thus helped the rise of global history avant la lettre.

Required Reading:


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


12. 3 December: The History of Development

Topic/Question:

Closely linked, as well as equally tied to this institution, has been the history of development. A relatively recent field of historical inquiry, the history of development has risen exponentially in recent decades, in tandem with the global history boom. Following on from our earlier, more theoretical, discussions of Eurocentrism, in this session we will ask more concretely about the implications of global history and of Eurocentrism for the writing of the history of development.

Required Reading:


Possible Presentations / Reviews:


13. 10 December: Class Taught by TA

14. 17 December: Digitization and Global History

Topic/Question:

This final session will be devoted to a rather different, more methodological, issue: What does the rise of global history (and transnational history, if you will) owe to the everyday digitization of historians’ work environment? Did we simply all jump on the global history bandwagon because it is so much easier to retrieve fine-grained information about a previously little-known person in the eighteenth-century Caribbean than it was thirty years ago? What kinds of anachronisms do we risk? And what gets lost through the digitization of our work?

Required Reading:
