This is an introduction to ongoing conversations among historians about U.S. politics, culture and society since the Civil War. Overlapping terrain among these fields is where I find the most exciting action, where historians work with diverse sources and balance culture and structure, power and agency, analysis and narrative, and qualitative and quantitative research. I have selected works that are synthetic, yet original. The monographs are broadly cast, often crossing boundaries of sub-discipline or making important methodological breakthroughs. The syntheses give you good grounding in history and historiography.

Graduate students should be building a base of knowledge and notes that will serve you in comprehensive exams and in your careers as scholars, teachers, or public historians. So obviously you should be thinking on several levels simultaneously as your professional identity takes shape. Ask yourself:

1) Do I have a good general knowledge of the historical canvas we are covering? If not, read one of the textbooks listed or others of the synthetic works. Could you explain to an undergraduate how the 15th amendment was subverted, why passing it angered so many women, why the U.S. entered World War I and why its aftermath engendered a Red Scare, where the KKK and the CIO had their social bases, what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 achieved?

2) How good am I at situating a book or article in its larger historiographical context, the historical “commons” where you find criticism, support and guidance. Use historiographical reviews, book reviews, and recent attempts at scholarly synthesis to get a sense of these “ongoing conversations.” Authors often tell you what they are contributing, who they are taking to task, who they consider kindred spirits in their fields (those footnotes tell their own stories). There is no way to “master the historiography” in this vast and fragmented field! But you should be aware of the ongoing conversations and select those sub-fields that you might want to join as an active participant.

3) A sense of the wider historiography should support, not detract, from the human beings and their history that shines through the best monographs and articles. Certain books deserve to be read deeply, with attention to their methods, writing styles, and skills at balancing interpretation, evidence and narrative. Is this a model for your own work? How does the author relate the evidence they have found to the tools historians have developed or borrowed
from other disciplines (including concepts like race, class, gender, nationality, identity, culture, subculture, structure, hegemony, social democracy, ideology, domesticity, consensus, conflict, civic space, kin, community, neighborhood, “memory,” agency, “public culture,” masculinity, “therapeutic anti-modernism” (!), celebrity, radicalism, pluralism, liberalism, conservatism, populism, imperialism and progressivism)?

Hint: You forget the vast majority of what you read, but you must read it to remember anything! Take thoughtful analytical notes that will make sense to you later! I do this a lot in the margins and then just flag the pages. Consult the reviews and historiographic essays to help clue you into what might be important to evaluate in a work. Choosing what to record, copy, or cite is a skill learned over years. Research has shown that people remember facts, dates, personalities and concepts that matter to larger questions they deem important. One good reality test is to ask yourself: Is there something here I would want to put in a lecture? If this person or someone in her field were interviewing me for a job, what could I say about this work that would make them think that I am smart and they are smart too? Is there a note or a quote here that might end up in something I would want to write?

**Class Discussion:** Of course this is crucial, because so much of functioning well as a historian is the ability to capture the gist of an argument, to be fair yet critical, and to be able to contribute to ongoing conversations in the field. So much time and work can be saved if you make this a group process. I ask each of you, as professionals to stay on-topic, stay high-minded, limit tangential anecdotes, and don’t go negative until we have a fair appreciation of an author’s efforts and contributions. I don’t need to say this in 98% of cases, as graduate students are generally extremely diligent and focused, and very much care about getting things right. This is a seminar, a collaborative enterprise. You get one unexcused absence.

**Discussion Board (weekly).** Informal 1–2 pages. Write a Blackboard entry answering two of the following questions: 1) How have these readings changed my understanding of US history or the historiography of this topic? 2) Is there a model here for doing good history? 3) Are there particularly good examples or concepts that I might incorporate into an undergraduate lecture? Respond to each other. I generally start the conversation with some questions. We continue them in class. This worked beautifully last time. Please be succinct; these are not where you need to demonstrate you’ve done all the reading. As with everything, these are reflective and evaluative.

5 5-page papers (sign up in advance; I want 2 by spring break). For each paper, I would like you to evaluate the week’s readings and at least one recommended source that either contests or complements the argument under review (obviously articles or selected chapters with a common focus are what I’m after -- ask me, I am a walking bibliography). These are obviously not descriptive recapitulations of the readings as much as they are your attempt to evaluate the merits of historical arguments in relation to the bigger historiographical questions historians address (and their methods of finding, organizing, and presenting evidence). Sometimes a book takes on several questions and interpretive challenges: your solution would be to focus on one
aspect in relation to other arguments in the historiography. There’s a trick to this, a balance of broad and deep. We will devote some time at the end of each class discussing what you have in mind for the next class. Everybody will hear my suggestions, and with your consent, I will put some of them up on Blackboard.

1 book review (750 words) on a recommended reading, along with a five-minute report on the author and the importance of the argument. This would be a book you would expect to include on your comps list -- please, no recycling old stuff.

Final synthetic essay along the lines of a major interpretive problem, 10-12 pages, will be due the day of the final exam. This will cite the readings broadly, but focus on questions such as the changing social roles and opportunities of women, or the interplay of local and national politics in the development of social welfare and civil rights, or peoples’ understandings of the proper boundaries and content of citizenship rights. Obviously you will rip out and revise previous writing, but I really expect this to function the way a good review essay functions. See examples.

Reviews in American History is an essential tool, as are specific book reviews and general historiographical essays. The essays in Journal of Southern History, Journal of American History, Journal of Urban History are generally more substantive than American Historical Review or Historian. We are blessed with Info-Trac and many online journals. It is worth it to go find essays in the New York Review of Books.

CLASS SCHEDULE

1/10: Introductions
What is your favorite historical study and why? Who do you imagine your most important audience(s) will be in your career? What are the most important things you hope they will learn? What is satisfying about doing history, what frustrating?

1/17: Citizenship and Historical Synthesis
Keysar, The Right to Vote

Recommended:
Eric Foner, The Story of American Freedom; Rogers Smith, Civic Ideals; Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen; Robert Wiebe, Self Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy; Michael Kazin, The Populist Persuasion: An American History. Recent syntheses by Christopher Lasch, Robert Norrell, Thomas Holt, Olivier Zunz all try to get their interpretive hoops around 20th-century US history. If you want to do a paper for this class, you might consider how several of these folks illuminate the impact of Reconstruction, World War II or wars in general as an engine of social and cultural change.
1/24: Black Freedom from Below

Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet
A good paper here might compare the methodologies of Hahn and Litwak with a view to answering how well each balances opposing factors of black agency and white coercion.

Recommended:

1/31: Paradoxes of Progressivism

Link, Paradox of Southern Progressivism, finish.

2/7: The Expansion of Women’s Political Sphere

Baker and Sklar under “Recommended” are two important syntheses of the biggest issues, and can help situate the following, but are not required.


**Recommended:**


Orloff, Ann Shola. "Gender in Early U. S. Social Policy." *Journal of Policy History* 3, no. 3 (1991): 249-81. [As a political scientist, she argues that the reform limitations were not so much derived from class and racial ideologies inflected in paternalism as plain and simple chintzy local governments.]


2/14: Native Americans and the West: Cultural Power, Cultural Consumption
Joy Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*
Ellis, Clyde, "We Don’t Want Your Rations, We Want This Dance: The Changing Use of Song and Dance on the Southern Plains." *Western Historical Quarterly* 30:2(1999): 133-54.

**Recommended:**

2/21: Race and Ethnicity in the Cities
Cohen, *Making a New Deal*

**Recommended:**

2/28: War and the Boundaries of National Identity
Gerstle, *American Crucible*

3/14: Cold War Culture and the Enduring Culture Wars

**Recommended:**
Any one of the fine authors collected in *History Wars* have books that define their field.

3/28: The Rise and Fall of Social Democracy
Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*

3/21: Landscapes of Inequality: Metropolitan Boundaries and Popular Struggles
New York: Knopf, 2003, chs. 4-5, 166-256.

Recommended:

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.*

2000). This is an extraordinarily thorough exchange among scholars. See Judith Stein rip into the book for an example of negativity that only embarrassed her, despite her good points.


4/4: Civil Rights and the Dialectic of Local and National Power
Charles Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom

Recommended:


**Recommended:**

**4/18: Family History, Family Values and the Policy Debates of the Late 20th century**
Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*

**4/25: Course Review**