History 615: Topics in Early Modern Europe

An introduction to classic interpretations, recent scholarship, and sources in intellectual history, cultural history, and the history of science, c. 1450-1700. Topics will include humanism and scholarship, natural philosophy and science, witchcraft and the occult, the arts, the organization of literary and intellectual life, and circulation of knowledge between different disciplinary and national contexts. Assignments will include a review, an annotated bibliography and bibliographical essay, and a historiographical synthesis. Interested students may continue with a research seminar in the spring.

Course structure

This course is a seminar. We will meet each week for about 2.5 hours, with a brief pause about halfway through. Except for the first week, the first part of each meeting will be led by two student presenters. After the break, we will focus on practical research methods and skills for approaching early modern European intellectual and cultural history, often drawing on the resources available at the Renaissance Center. The seminar format places much of the burden of learning on you and your fellow students. Not preparing for discussions will harm them as well as you. Though presenters will organize and lead the discussion, you should come prepared to every class; otherwise you'll be letting them down.

Requirements

Regular attendance and participation

Since a graduate course involves discussion, attendance and participation are crucial. I expect you to attend. Missing more than one class may seriously affect your grade. Missing a presentation will harm your partner and the rest of the class, so if you miss one you will likely get, at best, a B in the course.

Presentations

During the first class session you will sign up to do two paired presentations on course readings. Presenters are responsible for introducing the assigned readings and guiding discussion. A good presentation should give a brief account of the author’s career and scholarly interests, followed by a synopsis of the reading’s subject and main themes, an analysis of its methods and sources, and a set of questions for discussion. These questions, which will help frame the rest of the discussion, should address not only problems with the reading but also further questions that the reading raises but does not resolve. For the first half of the semester I have generally assigned one or more articles or chapters to accompany the main reading from a book; these don’t have to be treated as thoroughly but they should be addressed in the presentation, e.g. as sources of competing or alternative interpretations.
Annotated bibliography
In conjunction with your first presentation, you and your partner will prepare an annotated bibliography of (1) primary sources, (2) biographies, and (3) scholarly books and articles related to the presentation topic. This bibliography will be due by 5 p.m. the Monday before class, via email to the course mailing list. Note: students who sign up for weeks 2 and 3 may have until Monday, Sept. 22, to email their annotated bibliographies.

Book review
The week after your first presentation, you will hand in a 5-8 page (1500-2400 word) book review of the major assigned book for the week of your presentation. Unlike the annotated bibliography, this will not be a collective effort; you should feel free to discuss the book with your partner but do not share outlines or drafts of your review. You should bring a hard copy of your review to class. After you turn it in you should also email a copy to the course mailing list. Note: students who sign up for weeks 2 and 3 may have until Tuesday, Sept. 23, to turn in their book reviews.

Bibliographical essay
In conjunction with your second presentation, you and your partner will prepare a short (5-8 page) bibliographical essay addressing important scholarly books and articles related to the presentation topic. The bibliographical essay will be due by 5 p.m. the Monday before class, via email to the course mailing list.

Research proposal
Your final assignment is a 15-20 page research proposal that sets out an interesting historical question, relates it to a broader historical problem, discusses the existing literature on the problem, and presents a coherent set of sources available for your use, here or online, that you can use to try to answer your question. If you are continuing on in the spring with History 715, this proposal will be the basis of your research paper. Your research proposal will be due in hard copy on the final day of class. After you turn it in you should also email a copy to the course mailing list.

Grading
The final course grade will be determined by your performance on all 5 components, and class participation. The rough breakdown will be as follows:

- General participation: 10%
- Presentations: 20% (10% each)
- Annotated bibliography: 10%
- Book review: 20%
- Bibliographical essay: 15%
- Research proposal: 25%

If necessary, however, I will re-weight the elements of the course to your advantage. Grades in graduate courses reflect my professional assessment of your achievements and potential as an apprentice historian. Here is a rough key to their interpretation:

- A: excellent
- A-: very good
B+  good
B   acceptable
B-  marginal
C+  marginal to unacceptable
C   unacceptable

In addition to the grade, you will receive written comments at the end of the semester reflecting my assessment.

Readings

Required readings for each week are listed in the calendar, below. Most of the articles and book chapters will be available online, but each week there is one major book reading assignment (all or part of a book, depending on length) that you will have to buy or borrow. All books will be on 2-hour reserve in the library. I did not order books because I expect that many of you will wish to buy only the books that particularly interest you and that you’ll borrow the others. Nat Herold at Amherst Books has told me that he will keep a couple copies on hand of each of the books, except for Stuart Clark’s *Thinking with Demons* (which lists for $99 in paperback!) and Jonathan Dewald’s *Aristocratic Experience* (which is out of print but available online). Please make arrangements as early as possible to get the books you want, and allow extra time to read reserve copies of those you don’t want.

Two books that you will find invaluable for doing research in this course are:


If you find that the readings or discussions introduce a lot of unfamiliar terms, you should take a look at the following books:


Please note: if a reading is available online through a database to which the University of Massachusetts Libraries subscribe, I have indicated that on the syllabus, and you should figure out how to get it. If a reading is not available

Academic honesty policy

The UMass/Five College Graduate Program in History expects its students to abide by the Graduate Student Honor Code, which reads as follows:
We, the graduate students of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, hereby affirm that graduate students do not lie, cheat, or steal, or willingly tolerate those who do.

We do not plagiarize the work of others, falsify data, or knowingly allow false data to be generated or published with our compliance.

We do not harass or discriminate against others for reasons of race (phenotype), creed, sexual orientation, or political belief, or keep faith with those who do.

Unfortunately, cases of academic dishonesty have cropped up from time to time in the Graduate School, even in the History Department. The Department takes academic honesty very seriously; the normal penalty for plagiarism or other forms of cheating is, at the minimum, failing the course. My personal policy is to seek suspension or expulsion from the program, because cheating in graduate school violates the fundamental element of trust that is at the heart of the student-teacher relationship.

Class schedule

1 (9/2). Introduction; some historiographical considerations

2 (9/9). Languages, communities, and the Republic of Letters

3 (9/16). Printing and cultural transformation
Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. The printing press as an agent of change: Communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Read front matter, part 1, and conclusion (pp. ix-159, 683-708); skim the rest to get the gist of the argument.
4 (9/23). Renaissance humanism

5 (9/30). Renaissance and Reformation

6 (10/7). History and the past

Note: no class on 10/14

7 (10/21). Science, religion, and language

8 (10/28). Science, medicine, and commerce

9 (11/4). Structures of thought

10 (Wednesday, 11/12). The crisis of the seventeenth century?
11 (11/18). Enlightenment(s)

12 (11/25). Society, culture, and ideas

13 (12/2). Passages to modernity

14 (12/9). Conclusion; final papers due