

Political Historicism

Course Description: Mainstream political discourse in the United States has a deeply historicist dimension. Liberal and left-wing movements often call the political ideals and positions that they affirm “progressive” and say that those they oppose are “regressive”. The idea that progress is inevitable, that that passage of time somehow guarantees that society becomes more just, shows up in liberal and leftist political speeches (e.g. Martin Luther King Jr. “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution”) and pop culture (e.g. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). Right-wing movements, on the other hand, say that they are “conservative” and often rally around calls to preserve or revitalize some aspect of our collective history, such as Trump’s use of Reagan’s phrase “Make America Great Again”. These ideas often have very concrete and practical consequences for us. For example, the recent decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* turned on the idea that any practice that is neither explicitly mentioned and protected by the constitution nor “deeply rooted” in our “history and tradition” cannot be legitimately protected by the constitution. Put generally, people across the political spectrum tend to use historical language to defend their ideals and to argue against those with which they disagree.

These kinds of historicist claims have their own philosophical history that we will analyze and evaluate in this course. We will address questions such as the following: Why did philosophers start to tie claims about justice to claims about history? What do we mean when we say that something is “progressive”, “regressive”, or “conservative”? Is progress really inevitable? Should we believe that history and justice are meaningfully linked at all? Should we instead reject this whole paradigm? In order to address these questions, we will begin by reading some of the earliest and most influential philosophers who addressed these topics, Herder, Kant, and Hegel. We will then read prominent alternatives to and criticisms of the views of these early historicists, in particular those of Nietzsche and Foucault. We will conclude by reading some contemporary philosophers who attempt to revitalize the views of early German historicism in ways that respond to the critiques leveled against it. We will focus on Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi, and Robert Brandom.

Assignments and Grade Composition:

Participation & Attendance 10%

All students are expected to regularly attend and participate in class. Your participation grade is, in part, determined by *respectfully* navigating any disagreements that arise in class.

Discussion Questions 20%

During the first class, students will sign up to submit discussion questions for three weeks of class. These questions should be well-motivated and refer to specific claims or arguments made in the reading for that class. The questions will be available to all enrolled students one day before class.

Midterm Paper 30%

All enrolled students will write a 4-5 page exegetical paper explaining a specific argument or claim made by *one* author in *one* text. Students must select an argument or claim and have me approve the selection.

Final Paper 40%

All enrolled students will write a 9-12 page argumentative paper that defends a specific claim that engages with the text(s) covered in the course. Students are encouraged, but not required, to incorporate material from midterm papers with appropriate revisions. All students must have their topics approved by me.

Recommended Secondary:

Frederick C. Beiser *The German Historicist Tradition*
Terry Pinkard *Does History Make Sense?*
Sally Sedgwick *Time and History in Hegelian Thought and Spirit*
Colin Koopman *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*
Leonard Lawler (ed.) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*
Gary Gutting (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*
Raymond Guess “Nietzsche and Genealogy” in *Nietzsche*
Christopher Janaway *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*
Bernard Reginster *The Will to Nothingness: An Essay on Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality*

Schedule of Readings:

Week 1

Johann Gottfried von Herder: *This too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity*

Week 2

Kant: “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim”

Kant: “Conjectural Beginning of Human History”

Week 3

Hegel: *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Prefaces and “Its General Concept”)

Week 4

Hegel: *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (“The Realization of Spirit in History”)

Week 5

Hegel: *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (“The Course of World History” and “The Natural Context or the Geographical Basis of World History”)

Week 6

Hegel: *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (“The Phases of World History”)

Week 7

Nietzsche: Excerpts from *The Gay Science*

Week 8

Nietzsche: Excerpts from *The Genealogy of Morality*

Week 9

Foucault: *Archeology of Knowledge* (Introduction and “The Discourse on Language”)

Week 10

Foucault: *Archeology of Knowledge* (Part IV Chapter 5 “Change and Transformations”)

Week 11

Foucault: “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”

Foucault: “History of Systems of Thought”

Week 12

Foucault: *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (Part IV; Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2)

Week 13

Axel Honneth: *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (Chapters 1-3)

Week 14

Robert Brandom: *A Spirit of Trust* (Chapters 13 and 16)

Week 15

Rahel Jaeggi: Excerpts from *Critique of Forms of Life* Rahel Jaeggi: *Critique of Forms of Life* (Part IV)