

University of Austin
Center for Economics, Politics, and History

History, Historiography, and the Philosophy of History (3 credits)
Spring 2026

Course meetings:

Instructor:

Contact info.

Office Hours:

Required Texts: listed in each week of the outline below.

Course Description: The course is intended to introduce students to the discipline of history by offering a combination of the history of Western historiography and key readings in the philosophy and methodology of history.

Prerequisites: none

Course Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Have an awareness of the philosophy and methodology of history
2. Define the origins of the Western tradition in historiography and analyze multiple historical writings
3. Identify, explain, and discuss current debates about the political instrumentalization of history

Center Outcomes

1. Develop an understanding of the basic facts of the evolution of economies, governments, and businesses throughout human history
2. Develop skills consistent with the disciplinary tools needed to analyze systematically questions related to politics and economics
3. Use those disciplinary tools to analyze a broad range of economic and political problems that have arisen in human history
4. Demonstrate understanding of how governments and businesses deal with three core challenges: producing sufficient economic surplus to maintain the population, adjudicating disputes within groups, and adjudicating disputes across groups
5. Consider the implications of those four learning outcomes for public policy

With a focus on 2, 3, and 5

Course Requirements:

Policy on Plagiarism: Students are required to familiarize themselves with the definition of plagiarism included in the Student Handbook. Any student shown to be guilty of plagiarizing will automatically fail the course.

Attendance and participation: Class attendance and participation in all activities are mandatory. Students are expected to attend all classes and all examinations. Dates for all assignments and examinations are given at the beginning of the quarter and students are expected to make plans accordingly.

Academic Integrity Policy: Please review the University Accessibility Statement in the student catalog. Students having special needs should contact the Student Success Center.

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Disability Support Services: The university will make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The purpose of accommodations is to provide equal access to educational opportunities for eligible students with academic and/or physical disabilities.

Course Assignments: Grades will be based on three essays—one due week 3 (10% of the course grade), one due week 6 (20%), one due at the end (35%)—and a midterm examination (35%).

Grading Scale: A: 100-90 B: 89-80 C: 79-70 D: 69-60 F: ≤ 59

Weekly Outline

Week 1: Introduction: The State of Historiography

Students will be made aware of the current debates amongst historians (and non-historians) about the political instrumentalization of history, the possibility of “applying” history to policy, and the perils of “presentism.”

Kate Epstein, “The Purple Pill: Charlottesville in Retrospect and Prospect,” *American Purpose*, Aug. 9, 2021.

Niall Ferguson and Graham Allison, “Why the U.S. President Needs a Council of Historians,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2016.

Iain Hesketh, “What Big History Misses,” *Aeon*, Dec. 16, 2021.

Noah Smith, “On the Wisdom of Historians,” *Noahpinion*, Aug. 26, 2022, and the reply Bret Devereux, “On the Wisdom of Noah Smith,” *New Acquisitions*, Aug. 29, 2022.

James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” *Perspectives on History*, Aug. 17, 2022, and “Author’s Note,” Aug. 19, 2022

Week 2: The Birth of History

Students will learn about the origins of the Western tradition in historiography, looking in particular at the role of the ancient Greek historians, in particular Thucydides.

Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History*, ed. Adam Watson (London, 1981), chs. 4 and 5
Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (University of California Press, 1992), ch. 2

Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 BC), transl. Richard Crawley, Bk. I, ch. 1; Bk. V, ch. 17.

Week 3: The Philosophes

Students will discover how the historical discipline evolved between the late 17th and early 19th centuries, continuing to read extracts from seminal works.

Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1994 edn.), Bk. I, chs. 1-3, 15

G. W. F. Hegel, "Second Draft (1830): The Philosophical History of the World," in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, transl. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 25-151

Immanuel Kant, "Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View (1784)," in Patrick L. Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959).

Giambattista Vico, "The New Science," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*.

Week 4: The Victorians

The 19th century was the period when history emerged as an academic *Wissenschaft*—a science. Yet there remained a literary dimension to history, which historians will appreciate by reading Tolstoy and Trevelyan as well as Buckle and Bury.

Lord Acton, "Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History," in W. H. McNeill (ed.), *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 300-59

Henry Thomas Buckle, "History and the Operation of Universal Laws," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*.

J. B. Bury, "The Science of History," in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1973 [1956]), Part I, ch. 14

Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931)

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, transl. Louise and Aylmer Maude (London, 2001), Second Epilogue, chs. 1-12

G. M. Trevelyan, "Clio, A Muse," in *Clio, A Muse, and other Essays Literary and Pedestrian* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1913) pp. 1-55

Week 5: Marxists and "Realists"

In the 20th century various schools of materialism, many derived from the theories of Karl Marx, became influential especially in European historiography. This session focuses on both proponents and critics of Marxist historiography.

E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 2018 [1961])
Eric Hobsbawm, "The Century: A Bird's Eye View," in *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996 [1994]), pp. 1-20
Georgi Plekhanov, "The Role of the Individual in History," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, pp. 144-63
Bertrand Russell, "Dialectical Materialism," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, pp. tk

Week 6: High Liberalism

Students will learn how liberal historiography evolved in England Germany before and after World War II.

R.G. Collingwood, "Lectures on the Philosophy of History, 1926," in *The Idea of History: With Lectures 1926-1928*, ed. J. van der Dussen (Oxford, 1993).
R. G. Collingwood, "The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History (1924-5)," in *Essays in the Philosophy of History: R. G. Collingwood*, ed. W. Debbins (Austin TX, 1965).
G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (2nd edn., Oxford: Blackwell, 2002 [1969]), chs. 1, 2
Michael Howard, "The Lessons of History," in *The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 6-20
Friedrich Meinecke, "Values and Causality in History," in Stern (ed.), *Varieties of History*, Part II, ch. 4

Week 7: The Conservatives

This session introduces students to a group of British and American historians who offered a distinctive conservative approach to historical scholarship.

Michael Bentley, "Prologue," in *Public and Private Doctrine. Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1-13.
Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983)
Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (2nd edn., Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987)
Hugh Trevor-Roper, "History and Imagination," in Valerie Pearl, Blair Worden and Hugh Lloyd-Jones (eds.), *History and Imagination. Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper* (London, 1981), pp. 356-69.
John Vincent, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History* (Duckworth Overlook, 2005 [1995])

Week 8: Laws of History

The idea of general laws of history continues to attract the interest of scholars. Here, students will be introduced to some of the debates around "covering laws" and related notions.

Isaiah Berlin, "History and Theory: The Concept of Scientific History," *History and Theory*, I, 1 (1960), pp. 1-31
Pieter Geyl and Arnold Toynbee, "Can We Know the Pattern of the Past? A Debate," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*.

Carl Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, pp. 344-55

Week 9: Counterfactual History

An ongoing controversy in modern historiography relates to the validity of counterfactual ("What if ...?") questions. Students will be encouraged to debate the issue, drawing on the readings they have covered in previous weeks.

Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013)

Niall Ferguson, "Introduction, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

Niall Ferguson, "How Not to Counter Counterfactuals," in H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on "Symposium on Counterfactual Analysis" in *Security Studies*, 24, 3 (Jul.-Sept. 2015), pp. 378-430