UCLA Department of History
History of Science, Medicine and Technology MA/PhD written exams 2014

GENERAL FIELD EXAM

Write an essay on two of the following topics. You should aim to formulate clear arguments supported by specific historical detail and by analysis of the relevant historiography. Both essays together should demonstrate competence across a broad geographical and chronological range.

1. The history of early modern science used to be taught largely by reference to a series of great and innovative thinkers. Discuss what such a narrative would contain. Then discuss some of the historiographical innovations of the last twenty or thirty years, and their effect on the old narrative.

2. Scholastics and Cartesians found Newton’s system unacceptable for a variety of reasons. Discuss these critiques.

3. A few decades ago, it was still possible to ask why “science” or “modern science” only arose in “the West,” meaning Europe and transplanted European cultures. How has the historians’ understanding of science changed to enable history of the sciences of Asia, Latin America, and Africa to become topics of a flourishing historical literature? Be sure to mention specific works that helped to shape or, if you prefer, typify this gradual change of view.

4. Since the 1980s, considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to studying women in science, in various ways. How has this work intersected (or not) with work on gender and science? More recently, how has thinking about “gender” in addition to “women” changed the framing of research in the field and has affected the historiography more broadly? Be specific in your examples, and consider the evolution of studies of gender and science over time.

5. Write a retrospective essay review of one of the canonical books of the history of science. Consider its basic theme or argument, strengths, weaknesses, and especially the significance it has had for the history of science quite broadly. Candidate books might be: Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump*;
6. History of the “human sciences” is often treated as roughly synonymous with that of the social sciences, though centered perhaps in history of psychiatry and psychology rather than in sociology, anthropology, or economics. The term is also associated with a French organization of knowledge, and more specifically with Michel Foucault. Does it make sense, from the standpoint of history, to counterpose “human sciences” to “natural sciences,” and if so, along what lines would you draw the distinction? Or if not, what should “human sciences” mean, and in what ways have they intersected with the natural sciences since the early modern period?

7. Following the practice turn in the history of science there has been a focus on laboratory studies and on the construction of scientific facts. More recently these studies have come under increasing critique for having unduly narrowed down the focus of historical investigation. Referring to specific works discuss the original motivations to focus on practices, the move to laboratory studies and recent attempts to move beyond narrowly focused laboratory studies.

8. The Max Planck Institute for History of Science, in Berlin, arguably the most important institution of our field, has in the last few years reoriented its object as “the history of knowledge,” aiming thereby not to detract from history of science but to enrich the range of its resources. Drawing on particular historical writings (not simply historiographical), make a case for or against this move in the discipline.