Econ 242: The American Century

Course Overview:
Many statements that economists make about the world today are implicitly historical—that is, they are based on (often highly stylized) notions about the past. Such statements are particularly common in the area of economic development, where poor nations are encouraged to follow the path to success that the richest countries already blazed. For such policy recommendations to be valuable, however, the historical notions embedded within them need to be subjected to more explicit scrutiny. This course applies the theoretical tools of economics to understand how the United States overtook leading European countries at the end of the nineteenth century and maintained this economic lead over the next hundred years. Among other topics, we will consider the roles of mass production and big business, public health improvements, and the relatively early and widespread availability of public education. We will also discuss some of the problems that Americans faced as the nation grew, including racial disparities and economic inequality.

Course Requirements:
Read the assigned readings, attend each class session and participate in class discussions. Unless otherwise indicated, papers marked with a ** on the syllabus are the designated “discussion paper” for the session. Students must hand in two short questions about the discussion paper before the class starts. In addition, each student must give one oral presentation summarizing and critiquing a discussion paper during the term (no more than fifteen minutes).

Written Assignments:
Students will be graded on their presentations, class participation, and on one of the following two assignments (due Friday, March 14):

Assignment 1: Write two referee reports of the starred discussion papers on the syllabus. Each should be four pages in length (double spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins). The first page should summarize the main methods and findings of the paper, emphasizing its positive contribution to the literature. The final three pages should provide practical critiques of the paper. Each critique should be separately numbered.

OR

Assignment 2: Write a prospectus for a research paper that is influenced by reading in US economic history. Students may pair this assignment with a paper in another field but they must explain the explicit connection to US economic history. The prospectus should be eight to ten pages in length (double spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins). It should describe a research problem, make a case for its analytical significance, briefly survey the relevant literature pinpoint a body of source material that can be used to explore the problem, and outline a viable methodological approach.
Suggestions for summarizing and critiquing articles (for referee reports)

Summary:
Don’t feel that you need to be comprehensive or cover all aspects of the analysis. Just hit the high points. Here are some basic questions to think about as you prepare your summary:

- What is the big issue at stake in this paper?
- What is the model (explicit or implicit) that underpins the paper?
- What evidence/data does the author offer in support of his/her arguments? What techniques does s/he use to analyze the data?
- What are the main results?
- What conclusions does the author draw from the results?

Critique:
The trick to a successful critique is to first evaluate the author on his/her own terms and then to take a step back and assess the author’s approach afresh. The best critiques do not ask the author to do the impossible or the impractical, but instead generate ideas about how our understanding of a problem might usefully be advanced.

Here are some basic questions to think about as you prepare your critique:

Taking the author on his/her own terms:
- Does the author deliver on his/her promises and accomplish what s/he sets out to do?
- Is the paper internally coherent? That is, does its logic “work” within its own framework and set of assumptions?
- Does the author interpret his/her results correctly?

Assessing the author’s approach:
- If the author narrows the question in order to make it analytically tractable, does his/her re-formulation of the problem affect the conclusions we can draw from the study?
- Is the model (explicit or implicit) appropriate? Are there better ways to model the problem?
- Is the author ignoring data or other evidence relevant to the question?
- Are there better ways to analyze the data the author uses?
- Can the author’s results be explained in other ways? That is, are the findings consistent with alternative hypotheses?
- Can you think of additional ways to explore the question or test the various alternative hypotheses that the author may have ignored?
**Schedule of Class Meetings and Reading Assignments**

**Mon, Jan 6: US Growth and the First Industrial Revolution**

Assigned Readings:

Related Readings:

**Wed, Jan 8: Slavery**

Assigned Readings:

**Mon, Jan 13: Civil War (Questions due on any of the assigned readings, no student presentations)**

Assigned Readings:

Related Readings:

**Wed, Jan 16: Second Industrial Revolution**

Assigned Readings:
• A. Chandler, Jr., *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*
• **C. Goldin and L. Katz, “The Origins of the Technology-Skill Complementarity,”

Related Readings:

**Mon, Jan 20: No Class, MLK Day**

**Wed, Jan 22: Rise of Big Business**

Assigned Readings:

Related Readings:

**Mon, Jan 27: Immigration**

Assigned Readings:


Related Readings:

**Wed, Jan 29: Rise of Women’s Labor Force Participation**

Assigned Readings:


Related Readings:

**Mon, Feb 3: Fertility**

Assigned Readings:
Wed, Feb 5: Education

Assigned Readings


Related Readings

Mon, Feb 10: Health and Development (Questions due on any of the assigned readings, no student presentations)

Assigned Readings

Related Readings
Wed, Feb 12: Health and Development

Assigned Readings

Related Readings

Mon, Feb 17: NO CLASS, Presidents’ Day

Wed, Feb 19: Aging

Assigned Readings

Related readings:

Mon, Feb 24: The Legacy of Slavery

Required readings:


Related Readings:

**Wed, Feb 26: Rise of Cities (Matthew Kahn, Guest Lecturer, questions still due)**

Assigned Readings


Related Readings

**Mon, Mar 3: How Good are Our Statistics?**

Assigned Readings


Related readings:

**Wed, Mar 5 The Gold Standard**

Assigned Readings

**Mon, Mar 10: The Great Depression**

Assigned Readings

**Wed, Mar 12: Inequality**

Assigned Readings

Related readings: