CULTURES AND CONTEXTS
Urban Life in the European City, Ancient to Early Modern

CORE-UA 500
Fall 2017

Lectures: Tuesday/Thursday 3:30-4:45PM
Classroom: 12 Waverly Building, G08

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Office: TBD
Office Hours: TBD

Recitation instructors: TBD

OVERVIEW

This course explores urban life in premodern Europe from a multidimensional and comparative perspective. Starting in antiquity and ending in the eighteenth century, it asks how urban societies work and how images of urban life are constructed.

We will begin with key theoretical readings that emphasize the social dimension of urban life and invite us to think of urbanites as creative users of cities. Indeed, throughout this course we will pay special attention to everyday life and adopt a bottom-up approach, exploring how people of different backgrounds (e.g., gender, religion, and class) have experienced, imagined, and struggled with urban life. Can this rich archive of urban experiences from the past teach us lessons for the metropolises of our time?

The thematic approaches will be combined with case studies of particular urban societies of the past. These include ancient Athens, imperial Rome, medieval Nuremberg, Renaissance Venice, and early modern London. As we will see, many premodern urban societies faced similar problems, but the quest for solutions does not form a story of linear progress. The case studies we will discuss shed light on the dialectics of practical setbacks and utopian aspirations that runs deep in the history of the European city.

Lectures will be complemented by historical documents, literary and visual sources, and key texts from the research literature. All readings and visual sources will be made available online. In addition to three reflection papers, two creative writing assignments will provide opportunities to develop a personal approach based on your particular experiences of urban life.
COURSE GOALS

The goal of this course is to explore, from a comparative perspective and on a long timescale, how urban societies work and how images of urban life are constructed. By exploring a wide range of historical, visual, and literary sources we will probe how people in the past have experienced urban life and its challenges.

These course objectives align with the general goal of Cultures and Contexts, which is to prepare you for life in a globalized world. Through critical engagements with primary cultural materials, Cultures and Contexts introduces you to way humans come to understand themselves as members of the social, religious, national, and regional collectives, and with the dynamics of cultural interaction and influence. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, it is designed to extend your education beyond the focused studies of your major, preparing you for your future life as a thoughtful individual and active member of society.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

20% Active participation and attendance

10% Midterm exam in class on October 17 (study guide will be distributed)

20% Final exam, date TBD (study guide will be distributed)

20% Two creative essays (each counts 10 %)
  • Each essay should be 3 pages long.
  • See instructions in the syllabus.
  • Submit to recitation instructor.

30% Three reflection papers (each counts 10 %)
  • Each paper should be 3 pages long
  • For each paper, you choose one of two assigned topics. In your answer, draw on lecture notes and assigned readings.
  • Submit to recitation instructor.
Course Policies and Expectations

- Please be punctual to lectures and recitation sections.
- You will be responsible for all assigned readings in addition to material covered in lecture. Familiarity with readings and lecture content will be necessary to do well in the course.
- You will be expected to have completed the assigned readings before section meetings and to be an active and informed participant. It is recommended that you do the readings in the order in which they appear on the syllabus.
- Please turn off all phones during class and recitations. Laptop use is acceptable only for note-taking.
- Lectures and sections form an essential part of the course and should not be missed unless you have a medical or family emergency. Unexcused absences will adversely affect the participation component of your overall course grade. Students with more than three unexcused absences from lectures and/or recitations will be failed from the course.
- All work must be completed to pass the course.
- Papers should be double-spaced, with page numbers, standard margins, and standard 12pt font. Please format the notes according to the rules of the current Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). A useful summary of the basic CMS rules is available here: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Religious Holidays

During the first two weeks of the semester, please notify your recitation instructor of any planned absences due to religious holidays. Details on NYU’s policy may be found at: https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html.

Collaboration and Plagiarism

For your essays, you may find it useful to discuss your ideas with your peers. However, all written work you submit for evaluation must reflect your own approach to the topic. Plagiarism of any kind will, without exception, result in failing the course. Please take note of NYU’s official policy on plagiarism: http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html. Please also familiarize yourself with the Statement on Academic Integrity issued by the College Core Curriculum office.

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.
COURSE TIMELINE

SOURCE = historical or literary (primary) source

Week 1: What is a City? Introduction

L1: September 5
L2: September 7 (Start thinking about Creative Assignment #1, see below)

Lewis Mumford, “What is a City?,” 92–96.

Creative Assignment #1 (NYC): As we discussed this week, Kevin Lynch speaks of the “image of the city,” and Michel de Certeau writes that urbanites “make use of spaces that cannot be seen.” Is this a contradiction? Your answer should take the form of a personal three-page essay that will form the basis for discussion in section. Be sure to link the theoretical approaches to your own experience of New York City and illustrate your answer with concrete examples.

Paper due on September 14.

Week 2: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Ancient Greek Polis

L3: September 12
L4: September 14 (Creative Assignment # 1 due)


L5: September 19
L6: September 21


**Week 4: Daily Life in the Ancient Mega-City (I)**

L7: September 26
L8: September 28 (Questions for Reflection Paper # 1 will be handed out)

**SOURCE:** Selected sources on grain supply and its social dynamics (from: Brian K. Harvey, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 174–180)


**Week 5: Daily Life in the Ancient Mega-City (II)**

L9: October 3
L10: October 5 (Reflection Paper #1 due)

**SOURCE:** Roman graffiti (from: Brian K. Harvey, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 144–150)

**SOURCE:** Juvenal, *Satire* 3.


**Week 6: The City of Sins and the Christian City**

L11: October 10 (midterm study guide will be distributed)
L12: October 12

**SOURCE:** Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.28; XV.2.


Week 7: "City air makes you free": The Medieval City and its Social Cosmos

L13: October 17 (▶ midterm in class)
L14: October 19

**SOURCE:** Charter of King John to the town of Wells (1201)

**SOURCE:** The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes (1192)


Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*, 7–26.

Week 8: Daily Life in the Medieval City

L15: October 24
L16: October 26 (▶ Start thinking about Creative Assignment #2; instructions under Week 9)

**VISUAL SOURCE:** Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good and Bad Government on the City Life* (Frescoes in the Town Hall of Siena, ca. 1340). A link to a high-resolution file of these frescoes will be provided. Try to identify details that show the effects of good and bad government; based on your findings, compare the ‘good’ to the ‘bad’ city.

Chiara Frugoni, *A Day in a Medieval City*, 1–13; 21–43.


Week 9: The Early Modern City between Utopia and Upheaval (I)

L17: October 31
L18: November 2 (▶ Creative Assignment #2 due)

**SOURCE:** *Leonardo Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,”* 121–175.

**SOURCE:** *Marin Sanudo, “Praise of the City of Venice,”* 3–21.


**Creative Assignment #2 (city of your choice):** For this week, you will read two texts in which noted historical figures—Bruni and Sanudo—praise their respective city. In section, you will analyze these texts and discuss to what extent the image they construct corresponds with historical reality. But what actually constitutes a great city from your perspective? Choose one example—i.e., your favorite city, with the exception of NYC—
and describe it to a reader in the distant future. The target length for this assignment is three pages. As to content, you are free to experiment: as Bruni said 600 years ago, there is no default template for how to describe a city. Indeed, the more multifaceted your essay, the better: describing only physical and architectural features is not enough. You may also want to engage with the city’s history, its cultural offerings, and its social fabric. **Paper due on November 2.**

**Week 10: The Early Modern City between Utopia and Upheaval (II)**

L19: November 7  
L20: November 9

**SOURCE:** *Michel de Montaigne, Account of his stay in Augsburg in 1580 [recorded by his secretary], in Travel Journal, ed. and trans. D. Frame, 897–904.


Cowan, *Urban Europe (1500–1700)*, 123–149.

**Week 11: Navigating the Early Modern City**

L21: November 14 (Questions for Reflection Paper # 2 will be handed out)  
L22: November 16

**SOURCE:** Samuel Pepys, *Diary*. This assignment will be based on the dates of this week: go to [http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/) and read what Pepys did in this same week (Sunday to Sunday) 450 years ago (i.e., 1667).

Christopher R. Friedrich, *The Early Modern City*, 166–181.


**Week 12: Dealing with Crisis**

L23: November 21 (< Reflection Paper #2 due>)  
November 23: Thanksgiving Recess

**SOURCE:** Giovanni Boccaccio, Prologue to *The Decameron* (27 pages).

**SOURCE:** *Plague ordinance of the city of Marlborough, 1665* (2 pages).

**SOURCE:** *Proclamation of King Charles II regarding the rebuilding of London*, 1666 (3 pages).

**Week 13: Rulers and Ruled in the Baroque City**

L24: November 28
L25: November 30

**SOURCE:** Jean de La Fontaine, Letter from the town of Richelieu to his wife (5 September 1663). [For background information about the town of Richelieu, please also read the two pages from A.E.J. Morris’s *History of Urban Form*]


**Week 14: “Urban Odysseys” in the Eighteenth Century**

L26: December 5
L27: December 7 (Question for Reflection paper # 3 will be handed out)


**Week 15: Lessons from the Urban Past? Summary and Outlook**

L28: December 12 (Final exam study guide will be distributed)
L29: December 14 (Reflection Paper #3 due)

- No reading assignments for this week. Please use the opportunity to revisit and review the texts and topics we discussed. Familiarity with texts and lecture content forms an important aspect of preparation for the final exam.

**Final exam:** Date TBD by the Registrar