History, Memory, and the Quest for Social Justice in the United States

This course explores the relationship between history and memory, between what we know and how we know what we think we know. One of its primary objectives is to address the ethics of memory. Do we remember events not as they are but as we are? Do we have an obligation to remember events from the past? If we do, which events must we remember, and how do we remember those we did not experience? These questions have particular relevance to the way we understand the struggle for social justice. As such, we will examine some of the major events of the 20th Century, including the response to the Holocaust, the establishment of internment camps, the Hollywood blacklist, the Civil Rights Movement, the war in Vietnam, and the destruction of the World Trade Center. We will do this within the framework of three basic questions: How do we know what we think we know? How do we know what we do not know? How do we know what we do not know we do not know?

Requirements:

Read and bring to class all assigned material
Participate in class discussions
Submit papers on time. Late papers will not be accepted

Grading policy

Class participation: 10%
Paper 1 (In class-1-2pp): 10%
Paper 2 (2-3 pp.): 10%
Paper 3 (3-4 pp): 20%
Research paper proposal & preliminary bibliography: 5%
Research paper (10-15 pp.): 20%
Final paper (5-6 pp.): 25%
Paper topics, which will be based on the subjects and questions we discuss in the seminar, will be announced in class. For the research paper each student will select a subject in the struggle for social justice. The subject selected will be done in consultation with the instructor and will focus both on the importance of the subject as well as the contested history of the subject selected.

Books

Carson, Clayborne, et.al. eds.: *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*
Fitzgerald, F. Scott: *Great Gatsby*
Kovic, Ron: *Born on the Fourth of July*
Okada, John: *No-No Boy*
Salinger, J.D. *Nine Stories*
Stone, Geoffrey. *War and Liberty*
Thoreau: *Civil Disobedience*

Works followed by a (N) are available on NYU Classes
Works followed by an asterisk (*) are included in the Course Pack available from Unique Copy Center (252 Greene Street).

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September 4: Discussion of syllabus and course requirements.
Excerpt from Milan Kundera’s *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.
(Reading distributed in class)

September 11: “The past is not dead; it is not even past” How are we to know? What are we to know?
Joyce Carol Oates, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” 3pp. (N)
James Lowen, “Down the Memory Hole.” 16pp (*)
Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (pp.1-8)
*Eyes on the Prize*, pp. 1-60

September 18: Is there an ethics of memory? Do we have an obligation to remember—or a need to forget?
Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” 39pp. (*)
*Eyes on the Prize*, pp. 61-106

Paper 1: In class
September 25: Lincoln and the Civil War
   Lincoln’s Inaugural Address & Letter to Horace Greeley, 7 pp. (N)
   Blight: from Race and Reunion. 32pp (*)
   Stone, War and Liberty, pp. 22-40
   Eyes on the Prize, pp. 107-132

October: 2: Who Is an American?
   “If we turn this war, which was heralded as a war of humanity, in any sense into a war of conquest, we shall forever forfeit the confidence of mankind.”
   Carl Schurz to President McKinley, May 9, 1898

   Theodore Roosevelt, “True Americanism” 9 pp. (N);
   A. Mitchell Palmer, “Fear of Dissent” 3 pp. (N);
   Stone, War and Liberty, pp. 41-63.
   Eyes on the Prize, pp. 133-165

October 9: No class. Makeup class to be announced

October 16: The Lost Generation, The Wasteland, The Jazz Age, The Harlem Renaissance: What were the 1920s?
   F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (180pp)
   Eyes on the Prize, pp. 166-203.

   Paper 2 due

October 23: The Great Depression & World War II
   Michael Gold, “Did God Make Bedbugs?” pp. 320-326 (*)
   Stone, War and Liberty, pp. 1-21;64-84
   Eyes on the Prize, pp. 204-227

October 30: Father Coughlin, Charles Lindberg, and Henry Ford: The Rage of Anti-Semitism—Can It Happen Here?
   Philip Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic.” pp. 628-659 (*)
   Eyes on the Prize, pp. 228-287

November 6: Memorializing the Unimaginable
   J.D. Salinger, “Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “For Esme, With Love and
Squalor.” (pp.3-18; 87-114)
Michael Berenbaum: “When the Last Survivor is Gone” 3 pp.(N)
Daniel Mendelsohn: “Stolen Suffering” 3 pp. (N)
Eyes on the Prize, pp. 228-332.

Research paper proposal and preliminary bibliography due

November 13: Dresden and Hiroshima: Vonnegut, Hersey, and the Enola Gay
John Okada, No-No Boy (pp. 1-232)

The Golden Age and the Legacy of Jim Crow
W.E.B Bois, From Souls of Black Folk 9 pp.(N)
Eyes on the Prize, pp. 333-382

Paper 3 due

November 20: The Hollywood Ten, McCarthy, and the Vietnam War
Ron Kovic, Born on the Fourth of July (pp.1-216)
Stone, War and Liberty, pp. 85-127
Eyes on the Prize, pp. 383-438

November 27: Thanksgiving. No class

December 4: Civil Rights & Social Justice: Dreams and Nightmares
Selections from Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader
James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” 26pp(*)
Eyes on the Prize, pp. 439-590

Research paper due

December 11: Final class: Can we total it all?
Mario Puzo, “Choosing A Dream” 12 pp. (*)
Tillie Olsen, “I Stand Here Ironing” 12pp. (*)
Barbara Harrison, “Going Home” 12 pp.(*)
Stone, War and Liberty, pp. 128-165
Eyes on the Prize, 591-722.

Final paper due

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Please note:

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosecsd@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.