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Work and Labor in the United States after 1877

Fall 2025 Syllabus

Thursday, 2:00 to 3:20 PM and 3:40 to 5:00 PM

Professor Michael Merrill

Office Hours: By appointment

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DESCRIPTION: This course explores the history of the United States between, roughly, 1880 and 1960 from the perspective of its laboring and wage-earning majorities. It is especially concerned to follow the rise, first, of industrial corporate capitalism in the first half of this period (1880-1920) and, second, of a new, more multi-lateral international peace-keeping order in the second (1920-1960). After the Civil War the United States became a global industrial capitalist power. Using the United States between 1880 and 1920 as a case in point, we will begin by asking both what capitalism is and what it isn't, and by exploring its effects, negative and positive, on the world and its peoples. We will then shift our focus from the national to the international. In the first half of the 20th century two world wars killed tens of millions of people, and the collapse of capitalist economies world-wide resulted in a complete transformation of the global order. In response, the United States and its closest allies created a new, more multi-lateral international order to manage the global economy and, it was fervently hoped, to prevent a World War III. This global post-war liberal order is now under assault. What is it? How has it changed? What have been its strengths and weaknesses? Did it work? To whose gain or loss?

THEMES

- A. Money and its associated markets now dominate the economies of the world. It was not always so. According to the French historian Fernand Braudel, in 1800 the money economy—capitalism—was but a thin veneer covering a “vast world of self-sufficiency.”
- B. Two hundred and twenty-five years later, the balance has shifted decisively in the money economy's favor. Only the bottom third of the world's people now support themselves outside the market, and even they are connected to and dependent upon markets in myriad ways.
- C. The US conforms to this pattern. In 1800, 80 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was produced and circulated in a non-commercial gift economy; by 1880, 80 percent of the US GDP was produced and circulated by commercial and capitalist means.
- D. One of the primary goals of this course is to understand the far-reaching effects and implications of this transformation. Capitalism helped to industrialize the world. But it did so in ways that fundamentally changed both the Earth and how people lived on it.
- E. Among other things, it made both unparalleled prosperity and unparalleled destructiveness possible. Humanity became richer than it had ever imagined possible. It also acquired the power to destroy all and everything in its path, conceivably even life itself.
- F. A second primary goal of the course, therefore, is to consider the ways in which the richest and most powerful nations on Earth organized to manage their wealth and to avoid another world war, the consequences of which are likely be more catastrophic than we can imagine.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students who successfully complete this course will have met the following objectives:

Core Curriculum: (SCL, HST, WCr and WCd)

- Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems and other forms of social organization (Goal M)
- Employ tools of social scientific reasoning to study particular questions or situations, using appropriate assumptions, methods, evidence, and arguments. (Goal N)
- Explain the development of some aspect of society or culture over time. (Goal K)
- Employ historical reasoning to study human endeavors, using appropriate assumptions, methods, evidence and arguments. (Goal L)
- Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience, and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, &/or supervisors through successive drafts & revision. (Goal S)
- Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; evaluate and critically assess sources and use the conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources. (Goal T)

School of Management and Labor Relations:

- Communicate effectively at a level and in modes appropriate to an entry-level professional. (Goal I)
- Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation. (Goal IV)

Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations. (Goal 1)
- Make an argument using contemporary or historical evidence. (Goal 4)

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION: Rutgers welcomes students with disabilities into all its educational programs. To receive consideration for one or more reasonable accommodations, you must contact the appropriate disability services office on the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation to support your request for accommodations. For additional info, go to: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors as early in your courses as possible and discuss the accommodations with them. To begin this process, please complete the form found at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

PROCESS: This course has **two streams, four components, and six requirements**.

The two **streams** are: (A) an online *Reading Group*; and (B) an online *Writing Group*.

The four **components** are: (1) *reading* chapters of the required text, *Who Built America?* (2) *participating* in weekly online writing and reading group activities; (3) *attending* two online reading group and two online writing group reporters' meetings; and (4) *writing* a first and final draft of the two essays described more fully below.

REQUIREMENTS:

The six *requirements*, with the maximum number of points possible for each, are:

I. 100 points: Critical responses to the assigned reading activities posted to Canvas each week. *A post is worth 10 points, but you must participate each week to receive them.*

To participate in your reading group, you must: (a) post a response to your group discussion page, (b) “like” a posted response from someone, and (c) briefly explain why you liked it.

You can earn a maximum of 100 points in this area and there are 12 weeks of reading. As a result, you can miss two weeks without explanation or penalty and still earn the maximum number of points available in this area.

II. 100 points: Considered responses to the Writing Group exercise posted each week. *A post is worth 10 points, but again you must participate each week to receive them.*

To participate in your writing group, you must: (a) post a response to the writing group discussion question(s) on your group’s discussion page, (b) “like” the posted response(s) of someone else in your group, and (c) briefly explain why you liked them.

You can earn a maximum of 100 points in this area and there are 12 weeks of writing group exercises. As a result, you can miss two weeks without explanation or penalty and still earn the maximum number of points available in this area.

III. 100 Points: Participation in and reflections upon four synchronous online discussions, two before the midterm and two the after midterm, as described below. Each participation, including the required summary, is worth 25 points.

You only receive points for participating if you post on the synchronous discussion page a summary of the responses posted to your weekly group’s discussion page.

Weekly writing-group discussions meet on Zoom Thursdays from 2:00 to 3:20 PM. Weekly reading-group discussions meet on Zoom Thursdays from 3:40 to 5:00 PM.

IV. 100 points: First Drafts of the Midterm and Endterm Essays (see below).

The drafts must address the first three of the required elements of each essay as listed on the assignment page. Each of the elements earns 10 points, all three earn 30 points.

The instructor will read each draft and also randomly assign two other students to read and write peer reviews of the drafts. One completed review earns 10 points, two earn 20 points.

V. 100 points: Final Draft of Midterm Essay on the following topic posted to Canvas.

An essay that describes and assesses the strengths and weaknesses, benefits and costs, of the United States political and economic system after the Civil War from the standpoint of its working classes.?

To earn full credit, the essay must address all six of the required elements of the midterm essay and cite relevant portions of BOTH the assigned text (*but only the assigned text*), AND the posted summaries of weekly reading- and writing group reporters’ discussions. The final draft must also be a corrected and substantially improved version of the first draft.

A completed, corrected and improved final draft addressing all six elements earns 100 points. Incomplete drafts earn fewer points.

VI. 100 points: Final Draft of Endterm Essay on the following topic posted to Canvas.

An essay that discusses whether wars and the poor always be with us. Or can wars be avoided and poverty abolished? Why or why not? (Hint: Some countries are poorer than others and some are more often at war with one another or their neighbors than others. What is the difference between countries that are rich and those that are poor? Countries that are more often at peace and those that are more often at war?)

To earn full credit, the essay must address all six of the required elements of the end-of-term essay and cite relevant portions of BOTH the assigned text (but only the assigned text), AND the posted summaries of weekly reading- and writing group reporters' discussions. The final draft must also be a corrected and substantially improved version of the first draft.

A completed, corrected and improved final draft addressing all six elements earns 100 points. Incomplete drafts earn fewer points.

GRADING SCALE: Points are awarded on the basis of expended effort rather than achieved excellence. There are no good or bad, right or wrong responses. There are only responses that have been attempted, where an effort has been made, and responses that have not been attempted, where no effort has been made.

Grades are based on the following scale.

A = 600 to 570 points	(570 > B+ > 550 points
B = 550 to 520 points	(520 > C+ > 500 points
C = 500 to 470 points	(470 > D+ > 450 points
D = 450 to 420 points	(420 > F

There are fourteen weeks of class September 8 through December 8, for twelve of which a chapter from the textbook is assigned reading.

Points may thus be earned as follows:

Reading Group Activities (16.7 percent): Up to 100 points, 10 points per week of activity

Writing Group Activities (16.6 percent): Up to 100 points, 10 points per week of activity

Class Participation (16.7 percent): Up to 100 points, 25 points per participation

First Drafts (16.6 percent): Up to 100 points, 60 for required elements, 40 for peer reviews

Midterm Essay (16.7 percent): Up to 100 points, with 20 points for each required element

Final Essay (16.7 percent): Up to 100 points, with 20 points for each required element

Final Grade = Reading Activities + Writing Activities + Online Discussions + First Drafts + Peer Reviews + Midterm Essay + Final Essay

RECOMMENDED TEXT

Clark, Hewitt, Brown, Jaffee, *Who Built America?* Vols. 1 & 2. Third Edition. (2008).

Copies of each chapter are available as PDF files in Canvas or online at the [American Social History Project](#) website.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

INTRODUCTION: Thursday, September 4, 2025 (EVERYONE on ZOOM)

2:00 to 3:20 PM: An introduction to the course, its online format, and my expectations

3:40 to 5:00 PM: *Extra Credit Activity: The Human Swarm and Life-Boat Earth*

WEEK I: Thursday, September 11, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 1: *What is capitalism?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA I: Land, Labor, and Capital, 1865-1877

WEEK II: Thursday, September 18, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 2: *What are corporations?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA II: Progress and Poverty, 1877-1893

WEEK III: Thursday, September 25, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 3: *What are unions?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA III: Community and Conflict, 1877-1893

MIDTERM FIRST DRAFTS ARE DUE MIDNIGHT SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

WEEK IV: Thursday, October 2, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 4: *What is money?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA IV: From Depression to Expansion, 1893-1900

WEEK V: Thursday, October 9, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 5: *Changes in Working Conditions and Living Standards*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA V: Change and Continuity, 1900-1914

WEEK VI: Thursday, October 16, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 6: *What is socialism?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA VI: Radicals and Reformers, 1900-1914

MIDTERM FINAL DRAFTS ARE DUE MIDNIGHT SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18

WEEK VII: Thursday, October 23, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 7: *Are wars avoidable?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA VII: Wars for Democracy, 1914-1920

WEEK VIII: Thursday, October 30, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 8: *What makes people happy?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA VIII: A New Era, 1920-1929

WEEK IX: Thursday, November 6, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 9: *Why do markets fail and economies break down?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA IX: The Great Depression. 1929-1935

ENDTERM DRAFTS DUE MIDNIGHT SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8

WEEK X: Thursday, November 13, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 10: *How do capitalist economies avoid crises?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA X: Labor Democratizes America, 1935-39

WEEK XI: Thursday, November 20, 2025

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 11: *Why do nations go to war?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA XI: The United States in World War II, 1939-1946

WEEK XII: TUESDAY, November 25, 2025 [NOTE CHANGE OF DAY]

2:00 to 3:20 PM: [Writing] WG 12: *Can the world be saved?*

3:40 to 5:00 PM: [Reading] WBA XII: The Cold War Boom, 1946-1960

WEEK XIII: Thursday, December 4, 2025

EXTRA CREDIT: *Reviews of and reflections upon Who Built America, vol. 2*

EXTRA CREDIT: *What have we learned about capitalism, prosperity, and world peace?*

ENDTERM FINAL DRAFTS ARE DUE MIDNIGHT SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6

Revised: August 25, 2025