



HISTORY 1970D

THE PROBLEM  
OF  
**CLASS**  
IN  
EARLY AMERICAN  
HISTORY

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BROWN UNIVERSITY  
FALL 2020

This seminar explores what class can and cannot tell us about early American history. The course does not adhere to any particular theoretical definition of class, nor does it take the work of any particular theorist as its starting point. Rather, this course will examine how academic historians have defined class and how they have deployed it as a category of analysis. What is the “problem” alluded to in the title? Perhaps it is the term’s ability to describe both the objective (structural relations of power) *and* the subjective (individual identities). Perhaps it is the nature of early America itself, where slavery, patriarchy, and other hierarchical social relations defined who worked where and who owned what. Or perhaps, it is simply the belief that class is inoperative in such an open and fluid society as the United States. This course will consider how historians have responded to these challenges. Readings come from scholars who see American society as defined by class antagonisms, as well as from those who celebrate the ability of Americans to transcend class boundaries. In addition to viewing class from the shop-floor, we will see it from the bedroom, the ballroom, the boardroom, and the courtroom. The syllabus is designed to familiarize students with the historiography on class in early America, with the express hope that fresh eyes can put the pieces together in new and productive ways. The course culminates in research papers based on primary sources.

Logistics

*Seminar Meetings:* Thursdays 4:00–6:30 p.m., Zoom

*Office Hours:* Wednesdays 10:00–12:00, and by appointment, Zoom

*Contact Information:* [Seth\\_Rockman@brown.edu](mailto:Seth_Rockman@brown.edu)

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course students will:

- Develop content knowledge of the social structures governing British North America and the United States between roughly 1730 and 1840.
- Recognize class as a useful, if imperfect, means of analyzing the American past, and to understand class as always entangled with other hierarchies of power, structures of inequality, and categories of difference.
- Articulate the personal and political stakes of historical articulations of class relations to contemporary discussions of socio-economic inequality.
- Feel empowered to continue to explore Early American history and the history of class after our seminar is over.
- Be able to think and work like a historian, namely to:
  - identify, analyze, and evaluate* other historians' arguments, including their use and interpretation of sources, deployment of theoretical frameworks, and articulation of historiographical interventions
  - interpret* primary sources
  - use* theory to grapple with historical causality
  - situate* an argument historiographically, that is, in conversation with the work of other historians or scholars writing about a similar topic
  - integrate* primary source research and theoretical or historiographical framing, to craft and sustain an argument (in this case, over the course of a 20-25 page formal paper).

## Commitment to an Inclusive and Respectful Learning Community

I am committed to creating a classroom environment in which students from all backgrounds and perspectives are well served, students' learning needs are addressed both in and out of class, and all experiences, subject positions, and backgrounds are viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intention to present materials and activities that are respectful of racial, religious, gender, ethnic, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, age, and other differences. If there is anything that I need to know to communicate respectfully and effectively with you – for example, your lived name, preferred pronouns, access needs, pronunciation of your name(s), etc. – please let me know.

At the same time, at its core, this course deals with material that can be sensitive, personal, and contested, as class presently constructs much about the world we presently inhabit. There are tensions and disagreements among scholars and activists thinking about and with class, and certainly students will have different responses to our course material as well. I expect us to read, discuss, and listen to each other with openness and a willingness to engage with new ideas and perspectives, and with respect for each other. I ask you to uphold the principles of the University community as you engage in all aspects of the course. If you have concerns about a violation of these principles, I encourage you to raise them with all of us, with me directly, or via Brown's procedures for incident reporting.

The Coronavirus pandemic has heightened inequalities, and any one of us could encounter issues related to health, accessibility, resources, or inadequate workspaces during the semester. If you encounter disruptions to learning due to COVID or other related issues, please let me know as soon as possible and we will make an arrangement that makes sense for your situation.

## Accessibility, Accommodations, and Campus Resources

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Students who, by nature of a documented disability, require academic accommodations should contact the professor during office hours by the end of shopping period. Students may also speak with [Student Accessibility Services](#) at 401-863-9588 to discuss the process for requesting accommodations. Students in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact one of the deans in the [Dean of the College](#) office. Brown welcomes students from around the country and the world, and their unique perspectives enrich our learning community. To support students whose primary language is not English, services are available on campus including language workshops and individual appointments. For more information, contact English Language Support at [ellwriting@brown.edu](mailto:ellwriting@brown.edu) or (401) 863-5672. Also students may wish to consult other learning support resources on campus, such as [Academic Support Services](#) or the [Writing Center](#).

### Course Requirements:

#### (1) Books and Readings

The assigned books (visible on the schedule below) are for sale at the Brown Bookstore, available at lower cost through other vendors, and are also available on JOSIAH's e-Reserve. Articles and primary sources are available as pdfs via Canvas or Perusal. If your Brown undergraduate financial aid package includes the Book/Course Material Support Pilot Program (BCMS), concerns or questions about the cost of books and course materials for this or any other Brown course (including RISD courses via cross-registration) can be addressed to [bcms@brown.edu](mailto:bcms@brown.edu). For all other concerns related to non-tuition course-related expenses, whether or not your Brown undergraduate financial aid package includes BCMS, please visit the Academic Emergency Fund in E-GAP (within the umbrella of "E-Gap Funds" in [UFunds](#)) to determine options for financing these costs, while ensuring your privacy.

#### (2) Time Commitment

The total of in-class hours and out-of-class work for all full credit courses at Brown is approximately 188 hours over the length of a semester. In this class, students seeking to maximize their learning can expect to spend 33 hours in synchronous meeting (3 hours per week for 11 weeks), 70 hours reading for class (approx. 7 hours per week for 10 weeks), 20 total hours annotating sources in Perusal, 10 total hours preparing for class, conferencing, and participating in on-line discussions, 40 hours researching and writing the first draft of their final paper and 15 hours revising their final paper. Actual times will vary for each student; final grades are not determined by the amount of time a student spends on the course.

#### (3) Class Recording and Distribution of Course Materials

I would like to record our discussions because some students may be in different time zones, have poor internet connections, or have health issues. This means that we will record all classes to make them available to all students who are enrolled but cannot be present. If you have questions or concerns about this protocol, please contact me so that we can talk through those to also ensure your full participation in this course.

Lectures and other course materials are copyrighted. Students are prohibited from reproducing, making copies, publicly displaying, selling, or otherwise distributing the recordings or transcripts

of the materials. The only exception is that students with disabilities may have the right to record for their private use if that method is determined to be a reasonable accommodation by Student Accessibility Services. Disregard of the University's copyright policy and federal copyright law is a Student Code of Conduct violation.

#### (4) Technology

- Computer or tablet with reliable internet access and browser that supports Canvas
- The capacity to read or print out pdfs.
- Headphones, earbuds, and/or computer speaker
- A webcam if you are comfortable using video during synchronous meetings
- Capacity to use additional technological platforms such as Perusall, Slack, and Google Docs.

If you have any concerns or questions about access or the privacy of any of these platforms, please reach out to me.

#### (5) Academic Integrity

All student work must be in accordance with the Brown [Academic Code](#) (particularly in regard to plagiarism) and the [Code of Student Conduct](#).

### Assignments and Evaluation

These are the components of the course that feed into the final grade.

#### (1) Class Participation (40%)

The overall goal is that your presence in the seminar makes the class better for everyone by virtue of your deep engagement with the readings; your productive, substantive, insightful, and persuasive insights; your willingness to engage classmates and the professor in substantive exchanges; your efforts to create spaces of intellectual inclusion and support for the collective good of the seminar. In the bluntest terms, the course would be diminished without you. At the heart of participation is ultimately the weekly reading, so your participation should be geared toward showing that you've completed the reading and made every effort to grapple with it, integrate it with other things you've read, and drawn thoughtful conclusions from it. The venues for participation include:

- Weekly synchronous meetings via Zoom. Important learning takes place in the weekly discussion meeting, even as the robustness of that conversation may be constricted by having to convene over Zoom. Nonetheless, it is essential to generate a productive engagement with the weekly reading assignments, and particularly to thread conversation through from one week to the next.
- Before and After: the class will be broken into groups, with some students responsible for sharing some thoughts about the week's reading before we meet on Thursday, and other students responsible for sharing some takeaways from the week's meeting. This will take place on Canvas. Details to follow.

- Perusal primary source annotations. Students are expected to engage in our collective annotation project for **six of the eight weeks** documents are posted. You can respond to questions posed in the margins and to comments by classmates, and you should also be highlighting passages you find interesting and posing your own questions to your classmates. For any document you engage, the expectation is 5 annotations (questions, comments, observations, references, but no upper limit).
- Slack discussions. Students are encouraged to engage and support one another, share references and citations, and sustain the seminar spirit and community. There is no requirement to participate, but this is a good venue for students who may find it difficult to speak in the synchronous zoom meetings to convey their engagement with the readings.
- Office hours and conferences. I am available for online video chats during the duration of the class. Each student is required to join me for at least one chat during the first few weeks of the semester (to get to know each other), as well as during the week of November 2 (to discuss your research projects). A few good ideas about how to use these meetings: to discuss readings, to talk through your writing in the draft phase or after final submission, or for ongoing dialogue about how best to meet your own learning goals in the course. I will likely use [appointment slots](#) on Google Calendar to set this up.

## (2) Research Paper (60%)

This 20-25 page formal paper, based on independent research on a topic chosen in consultation with the professor, is due at the end of the semester, broken into the following sequence of assignments:

- *paragraph brainstorm about possible topics (credit/no credit)* Due 9/29
- *initial proposal: 3 pages*, should include a description of your sources and a brief discussion of what it/they might contribute to the historiographical, methodological, or theoretical questions raised by our class. (credit/no credit, written feedback) Due 10/30
- *revised proposal: 4-6 pages* should set out what your final paper is going to do, in the wake of individual conferences the week of November 2. Due 11/10.
- *draft of essay + peer review (credit/no credit, peer feedback)*. A draft of your final essay will be submitted to a team of peer reviewers and to me at the same time. Peer reviewers provide comments on how their own experience of reading your work suggest both the strengths of your writing and the areas that most need to be addressed in revision. You are ultimately your own best editor, or you should aspire to be, and you may or may not choose to follow the directives given to you by me or by your peer editors. But the process gives you insights into how to become that good editor by showing you how others read your words. You will find the guidelines for the peer review process and you will be assigned peer review teams with the prompt for the final project. Due 12/1
- *final paper (graded, written feedback)*. Due 12/11

## Schedule and Readings

### **Thursday, September 10: Introduction to the Course**

### **Thursday, September 17: Class as Structure and Subjectivity in Early America**

\*Marcus Rediker, "The Revenge of Crispus Attucks; or The Atlantic Challenge to American Labor History," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1 (2004): 35–45.

\*Nancy Isenberg, "Pedigree and Poor White Trash," in *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2017), 135–153.

\*Greg Nobles, "Class," in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 259–287.

\* Thomas Summerhill, "The United States as a Postcolonial State, 1789-1865," in *Transatlantic Rebels: Agrarian Radicalism in Comparative Context*, eds. Thomas Summerhill and James C. Scott, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 55–86.

**Perusall:** Seth Luther, *An Address on the Right of Free Suffrage...* (Providence: S.R. Weeden, 1833)

### **Thursday, September 24: Class and Slavery in the Colonial Era**

\* Noeleen McIlvenna, *The Short Life of Free Georgia: Class and Slavery in the Colonial South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), all.

**Perusall:** *An Essay on Currency, Written in August 1732* (Charlestown, S.C.: Lewis Timothy, 1734)

### **Thursday, October 1: Entangled Class Relations in the British Atlantic**

\* Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

**Perusall:** [Samuel Seabury], *Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress...* (New York: James Rivington, 1774).

### **Thursday, October 8: Class and the US Constitution**

\*Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), all.

**Perusall:** Robert Coram, *Political Inquiries: to which is added a Plan for the General Establishment of Schools throughout the United States* (Wilmington: Andrews and Brynberg, 1791).

## **Thursday, October 15: Theorizing Class under Racial Capitalism**

- \*Nancy Fraser, “Is Capitalism Necessarily Racist?” *Politics/Letters* 15 (2019) and replies.
- \* Gerda Lerner, “Rethinking the Paradigm: Class and Race,” in *Why History Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146-198.
- \* Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the U.S.A.,” *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 95-118.
- \*Adolph Reed, Jr. “The Trouble with Disparity,” September 2020, on-line
- \* Asad Haider, “Class Cancelled: The Class Reductionism Debate,” August 2020, on-line.
- \*Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977

## **Thursday, October 22: Poverty and Poor Relief**

- \*Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margins in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), all.
- Perusall:** *Report of the Library Committee of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy...* (Philadelphia: Merritt, 1817).

## **Thursday, October 29: Populist Politics**

- \*Daniel R. Mandell, “Clashes over America’s Political Economy,” in *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600-1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 136–163.
- \*Reeve Huston, “Popular Movements and Party Rule: The New York Anti-Rent Wars and the Jacksonian Political Order,” in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, eds. Jeffrey L. Pasley et al., (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 355–386.
- \*Sean Wilentz, “Democracy in Rhode Island: The Dorr War,” in *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 539–545.
- \* Sean F. Monahan, “The American Workingmen’s Parties, Universal Suffrage, and Marx’s Democratic Communism,” *Modern Intellectual History* (2020): 1–24.
- Perusall:** Frances Wright, “On Existing Evils, and their Remedy,” 1829

## **Thursday, November 5: No Class Meeting. Individual Conferences to be Held**

### **Thursday, November 12: Slaveholders as a Class**

\*Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), all.

**Perusall:** William Harper, *Anniversary Oration [to the South Carolina Society for the Advancement of Learning]* (Charleston: Telescope Office, 1836).

### **Thursday, November 19: Contours of Class in the Antebellum City**

\* Brian Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), all.

**Perusall:** *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1838).