

HTS 6106, Spring 2011
M, 6-9; Old CE 104

S. W. Usselman
M, 3-5; Old CE 137

Business Organizations and Political Economy

Orientation and Objectives

As its title suggests, this course blends four currents of intellectual inquiry: business history, organizational studies, political history, and economic history. Each of these is, in itself, a hybrid discipline combining insights from multiple perspectives. Over the course of the term, we will regularly find ourselves drawing upon fields ranging from strategy, entrepreneurship, and sociology to political science, public policy, and economics. We will do so, moreover, across two decades of American history.

This is a tall order, one which is further complicated by the fact that some of you have already been exposed to the material in a previous incarnation of the course, while others of you are just starting down this path. We will try to turn that to our advantage by having the veterans present reports on supplemental readings, while the rookies concentrate on a common core. But we need to remain aware of the varying experiences and degrees of understanding we bring to the class.

While the course draws upon numerous disciplines, it is anchored in an exploration of what some have called the New Institutionalism. This is an approach to history that emphasizes organizational structures and institutions of governance, in both the public sphere and the private. Much of our course will focus upon the ongoing interplay of these institutions, including the vital roles played by intermediaries such as professional experts, and their relation to economic performance across time. “Economic performance” is an intentionally vague concept meant to encompass both aggregate measures such as growth rates and GNP as well as more differentiated phenomena occurring at the level of the individual firm and family.

Within that general field of inquiry, moreover, we will further narrow our scope by placing particular emphasis upon the ways in which these institutional arrangements at once reflect and shape changes in technology and technical practices. At several points, our course will entertain arguments regarding the influence of technology upon American institutions. (Yes, we will entertain the possibility of technical determinism.) At other points, we will examine institutions of governance that are directed more or less explicitly at influencing technology, such as the patent system, education, research and development, antitrust, and environmental regulation. The syllabus attempts to balance these objectives by providing opportunities to trace broad developments across time while also probing deeply into subjects of particular relevance to current technical practices.

Perhaps more than in some other history courses you have encountered, this class will keep the present in mind as it explores the past. It actively encourages you to use history as a sort of laboratory for evaluating how certain policies and institutional arrangements

operate under various conditions. At the same time, it attempts to historicize our contemporary world and explain how current institutional arrangements and practices reflect a historical legacy grounded in events of the American past. In this sense, the course encompasses two persistent concerns of American history: the historian's inherent interest in tracing continuity and change across time, and the Americanist's inescapable query regarding the exceptionalism of the United States. As with technical determinism, we will not flinch from the notion of American exceptionalism or dismiss it out of hand; rather, we will examine the concept and interrogate it as a potential tool for sharpening our understanding.

As we make such assessments, we will inevitably find ourselves paying considerable attention to two hallowed concepts: market capitalism and political democracy. These are of course the lightning rods of much contemporary public discourse, as they have been throughout the history of the United States. Many on the Right see the two as ready complements; many on the Left see them as essentially in opposition. Neither proposition bears much relation to the messy realities of the American past and its evolving institutions, which typically constitute creative hybrids, practical compromises forged as pragmatic responses to the perpetual forces of change.

This course attempts first and foremost to comprehend how these ongoing efforts at compromise have emerged and evolved in practice across time. "How" might seem a humble question, but I believe it is the essential historian's question, and the surest way for the discipline to contribute to the ongoing conversation about where we are going and how we might get there.

Assignments

Students enrolled in HTS 6106 are expected to read the common assignment each week, post a question based upon it by 3:00 PM on the day of the class, and participate fully in the group discussion. At the end of the term, these students will write a comprehensive final take-home exam based on these core readings. In addition, during the course of the term they will write a comparative review essay of 8-10 pages based on two additional books or a body of additional articles pertaining to a common topic. These supplemental readings should be approved in advance after consultation with me.

Students who have previously taken HTS 6106 and are participating in the seminar under a special topics or independent studies rubric should read the common assignment each week, post questions if they so desire, and attend and participate with suitable discretion in the group discussion. They will also prepare occasional reports on supplemental readings. We will work out a detailed schedule of supplemental reports, which should be written and distributed to the entire group as well as summarized orally in class, after our initial organizational meeting. At appropriate moments in the term, these students should also write three interpretive essays incorporating the common readings, the supplemental readings on which they and their colleagues have given reports, and any additional readings of relevance they have completed in the course of preparing for their doctoral

qualifying exams. These essays, written in response to my prompts, should serve as practice exercises for those exams.

Readings

Most of the assigned readings for the group come from books; some weeks, we will draw primarily from articles. I have not ordered books; you should acquire them from a vendor of your choice. Several are available at significant discount from Amazon.

Here is the list of books:

Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Harvard, 1977)
Steven W. Usselman, *Regulating Railroad Innovation* (Cambridge, 2002)
Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight* (Cambridge, 2009)
Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford, 2009)
Thomas McCraw, *American Business, Since 1920*; 2d Edition (Harlan Davidson, 2009)
Louis Galambos and Joseph Pratt, *Rise of the Corporate Commonwealth* (Basic, 1989)
Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (Cambridge, 2001)
Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000 or 2009)
Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *Race between Technology and Education* (Harvard, 2010)

Schedule (subject to some adjustment and elaboration)

- 1/10 Introduction and Orientation
- 1/17 King Holiday – No Class
- 1/24 The Chandlerian Paradigm of Business History (Chandler, *The Visible Hand*)
- 1/31 Early American Enterprise (Usselman, *Regulating*, Part I, plus articles TBA)
- 2/7 The Nineteenth-Century State (Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight*)
- 2/14 Continental Capitalism (Usselman, *Regulating*, Parts II & III)
- 2/21 Populism and Progressivism (Postel, *The Populist Vision*)
- 2/28 The Twentieth-Century Firm (McCraw, *American Business*)
- 3/7 The Twentieth-Century State (Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*)
- 3/14 Consumerism and the Environment (Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*)
- 3/21 Spring Break – No Class
- 3/28 Post-Industrialism (Castells, *Rise of the Network Society*)

4/4 R&D (TBA)

4/11 Antitrust and Intellectual Property (TBA)

4/18 Education (Goldin and Katz)

4/25 Coda (TBA)