



History 156:

HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WORKER

INSTRUCTOR: Sean Trainor | Ph.D. Candidate | History & Women's Studies | Penn State University

DATE AND TIME: TR 2:30pm-3:45pm | 12 January – 1 May, 2014 (Spring 2015)

LOCATION: 201 Thomas Building

OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays, 10:30am – 11:30am | Thursdays, 4:00pm – 5:00pm | 115 Pond Laboratory

EMAIL: sxt261@psu.edu | TWITTER HANDLE: @ess_trainor | CLASS HASHTAG: #Hist156_PSU

COURSE OVERVIEW

Work matters. Few activities consume so much of our time. And few, if any, are more socially consequential. And yet many of the most important kinds of work are hidden from view. Sanitation workers rumble past long before most of us are awake. Cleaning crews sanitize our campus's restrooms and classrooms long after classes are over. And the people who make most of things we depend upon are carefully sequestered in obscure corners of the U.S. – and more often in developing world countries that many of us would struggle to locate on a map. Perhaps more importantly, many of the most useful kinds of labor – including child-birth and child-rearing – are rarely even regarded as work: a labor of love, if a labor at all.

This course is designed to challenge our society's carefully-constructed tendency to obscure the kinds of work that make our lives possible; to tell the stories of the women and men whose labor, quite literally, built America. These include the stories of the enslaved men and women who grew the cotton that enriched the early American economy and the auto workers who made Detroit Motor City. But they also include the stories of people whose relation to America's industrial and economic might are far more obscure: the midwives and housewives; the prostitutes and pirates; the counter-jumpers and falls-jumpers.

The goal of this course, therefore, is not *just* to recast workers, rather than capitalists and entrepreneurs, as the protagonists in the story of American economic might. It is also an attempt to endow all workers' labor with dignity and meaning; and to show how the workplace – broadly conceived – has constituted one of the most important sites of oppression, as well as grassroots empowerment, in U.S. history. Upon departing the course, I hope to leave you with a broad set of questions about how and why our economy is organized the way it is – and how it might be reorganized in the future.

COURSE STRUCTURE

This is a discussion-based class. I expect all students to arrive in class every Tuesday prepared to discuss the week's readings. While I will offer a brief, introductory lecture prior to most sessions, the majority of each class will be devoted to open-ended Q&A.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004). ISBN: 978-0809083886
- Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Dover, 2001). ISBN: 978-0486419237
- Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (Picador, 2011). ISBN: 978-0312626686.

GRADING AND EVALUATION

- Please note: there will be NO final exam in this class. -

- *Attendance:* 10%
- *Quizzes:* 15%
- *Participation:* 15%
- *Documentary / Podcast Project:* 30%
- *Papers:* 30%

Attendance

Students are allowed **two absences** over the course of the semester. I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences (although I will consider extenuating circumstances on a case-by-case basis).

Quizzes

Students will be required to take **ten quizzes** over the course of the semester. These will consist of one-paragraph, open-ended, in-class written reflections on the week's readings, testing basic reading comprehension. Quizzes will be administered at random.

Students will be awarded one point if they demonstrate a firm understanding of the readings, a half point if they demonstrate basic familiarity, and no points if they clearly have not read the texts or read them with such inattention that they do not grasp their basic premise.

Participation

Students are expected to participate in **every session**. Those who do so will be awarded one point per class for a comment or question of nearly any quality – so long as it is not offensive, disrespectful, or intentionally irrelevant.

I also recognize that some students may find verbal participation in class discussion difficult or uncomfortable. While I believe that learning to express one's thoughts and feelings verbally is an important part of a college education, I would nonetheless like to accommodate less-outgoing students. Persons in the latter category should feel free to post comments or questions (for full credit) on the ANGEL message board or compose a Tweet with the hashtag #Hist156_PSU. I will address message board comments and Tweets either online or in the following class session.

Documentary / Podcast Project

Working in groups of 2 to 3, students will create a short, 20-to-30 minute documentary or podcast on one of the many kinds of work that makes life in our community possible. The point of the project is to celebrate the lives and labors of the unsung men and women who constitute the backbone of Happy Valley. (See prompt on ANGEL for details.)

Papers

Students will write a 4-6 page essay on each of the three assigned texts: Johnson's *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper*, Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. Detailed paper prompts are available on ANGEL. Each paper will be worth 10% of students' final grade.

GRADE SCALE

Grades for Papers

A = 95

A-/A = 92.5

A- = 91

B+/A- = 89.5

B+ = 88

B/B+ = 87

B = 85

B-/B = 82.5

B- = 81

C+/B- = 79.5

C+ = 78

C/C+ = 77

C = 75

C- = 71

D+ = 68

D = 65

D- = 61

F = 60

Final Course Grades

94-100 = A

90-93.9 = A-

88-89.9 = B+

82.5-87.9 = B

80-82.4 = B-

78-79.9 = C+

72.5-77.9 = C

70-72.4 = C-

68-69.9 = D+

62.5-67.9 = D

60-62.4 = D-

Less than 60 = F

LATE PAPERS

Late papers will be marked down one half letter grade for each day that they are late, unless students provide me with documentation of extenuating circumstances.

EMAIL POLICY

Barring extenuating circumstances, I will respond to all student emails in 36 hours or fewer. I will not respond to emails between the hours of 10pm and 9am.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

University policies related to academic matters (for example, rules governing academic dishonesty) are strictly upheld in this course.

Penn State defines academic integrity as the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest, and responsible manner. All students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts (Faculty Senate Policy 49-20).

Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Students who are found to be dishonest will receive academic sanctions and will be reported to the University's Judicial Affairs office for possible further disciplinary actions.

For more on the university's academic integrity policy, please visit the following website:

<http://handbook.psu.edu/content/academic-integrity>.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

I warmly welcome students with disabilities to History 130 and will be happy to make any accommodations necessary to ensure that their time in the classroom is safe, pleasurable, and productive. Students with disabilities that require adjustments to the syllabus or course assignments should contact the Office for Disability Services as early in the term as possible. Students with disabilities should also notify the instructor as soon as possible and be aware that documentation from ODS will be required before adjustments can be made. For further information regarding policies, rights, and responsibilities please visit the ODS website at: www.equity.psu.edu/ods/.

I am particularly sensitive to the fact that the paper assignments for this course are largely open-ended. While I firmly believe that successfully tackling these kinds of assignments is an important part of a humanities education, I recognize that students with certain kinds of learning and intellectual disabilities require more structured prompts. Pending proper documentation, I will be happy to accommodate students' needs.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

Penn State is committed to provide all persons equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by Commonwealth or Federal authorities. Penn State does not discriminate against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, gender, sexual orientation, or veteran status.

For further information, please visit the Affirmative Action Office Web site at:

<http://www.psu.edu/dept/aaoffice/>.

TEACH ACT STATEMENT

The materials for this course are only for the use of students enrolled in this course for purposes associated with this course and may not be retained or further disseminated.

SCHEDULE OF CLASS / SCHEDULE OF READINGS

All readings, except required texts, available on the ANGEL course management system

Week 1 (13 – 15 January):

LEARNING TO LOOK FOR LABOR

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore the Marxist concept of 'commodity fetishism' and the way in which the modern marketplace tends to explode the backstory, as it were, of the things that we buy and sell: who made them, using what, and so on. We will also discuss why the human relationships that make good possible are important – indeed vital – to understand, and why labor history offers a compelling antidote to commodity fetishism.

Readings:

- Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," *Capital*.
- Film, "The Story of Electronics," *The Story of Stuff*.

Week 2 (20 – 22 January):

COLONIAL LABOR

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore the labor of rural and urban men and women in colonial British North America.

Readings:

- Robert Middlekauff, "The Children of the Twice-Born" in *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, 30-42.
- Ira Berlin, "Charter Generations" and "Plantation Generations" in *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, 21-39, 53-88.
- Edmund S. Morgan, "The Labor Problem at Jamestown, 1607-18," *The American Historical Review* 76 (Jun., 1971), 595-611 (A-L last names).
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (Jan., 1998), 3-38 (M-Z last names).

Week 3 (27 – 29 January):

THE WORK OF REVOLUTION

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore the working lives of British subjects turned American citizens (as well as persons, including slaves and indigenous communities, that were left out of the latter category) at the time of the U.S. War of Independence.

Readings:

- Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, “A Motley Crew in the American Revolution,” *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, 211-247.
- Ira Berlin, “Revolutionary Generations,” *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, 99-140.
- Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly* 28 (Summer 1976), 187-205.

Week 4 (3 – 5 February):

THE WORK THAT WASN'T

**- NAMES OF PROJECT GROUP MEMBERS AND
A/V EQUIPMENT LIST DUE THURS., 5 FEB. -**

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore a number of kinds of work, all of them closely associated with women, whose relationship to standard definitions of labor was complicated: these include housework, reform work, and sex work.

Readings:

- Jeanne Boydston, introduction to *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, ix-xx.
- Christine Stansell, “Chapter 9: Women on the Town: Sexual Exchange and Prostitution,” *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, 171-192.
- Lori D. Ginzberg, “Chapter Two: The Business of Benevolence,” *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, 36-66.
- Wendy Gamber, introduction to *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1-10.

Week 5 (10 – 12 February):

THE WORK OF BLACKNESS

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore the kinds of ‘work’ that the concept of race performed in the nineteenth-century United States, and the various ways in which race shaped the laboring lives of enslaved and free African-Americans.

Readings:

- Adrienne Davis, “‘Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*.
- Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *The Journal of American History*.

Week 6 (17 – 19 February):

THE IMMISERATION QUESTION: CAPITALISM'S IMPACT ON FREE WHITE MALE WORKERS, PART I

- FIVE-MINUTE PRACTICE VIDEO DUE THURS., 19 FEB. -

Topic Overview: During weeks 6 and 7, we will explore the impact of the economic transformations of the early nineteenth-century on free white workers. We will be devoting particular attention to a long-standing and heated question: did capitalism improve or diminish their lot?

Readings:

- Seth Rockman, introduction and “Dredging and Drudgery,” *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*, 1-15, 75-99.
- Richard Stott, “Artisans and Capitalist Development,” *Journal of the Early Republic*.
- Leslie T. Chang, “The Voices of China’s Workers,” *TED* ([link here](#)).

Week 7 (24-26 February):

THE IMMISERATION QUESTION: CAPITALISM'S IMPACT ON FREE WHITE MALE WORKERS, PART II

**- NAMES OF INTERVIEWEES, PROJECT COMPLETION PLAN,
AND SIGNED INTERVIEWEE CONSENT FORMS DUE THURS., 26 FEB. -**

Topic Overview: During weeks 6 and 7, we will explore the impact of the economic transformations of the early nineteenth-century on free white workers. We will be devoting particular attention to a long-standing and heated question: did capitalism improve or diminish their lot?

Readings:

- Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch: The Famous Jumper*.

Week 8 (3 – 5 March):

WHITE COLLAR WORK?: CLERKS AND DOMESTICS IN THE ANTEBELLUM U.S.

- PAPER 1 DUE ON THURSDAY, 5 MARCH -

Topic Overview: This week’s classes explore the lives and labors of the women and men who filled two of the largest occupational categories in the antebellum United States: domestic workers and clerks.

Readings:

- Excerpts from Faye E. Dudden, “The Elaboration of Needs and the Division of Household Labor,” *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*, 104-154.

- Brian Luskey, “Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability, and Work in the Antebellum City,” *Journal of the Early Republic*.

Week 9 (10 – 12 March):

SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS

Week 10 (17 – 19 March):

THE WORK OF WAR

- ONE-PAGE PROJECT PROGRESS REPORT DUE THURS., 19 MAR. -

Topic Overview: This week’s classes explore the work of soldiers and the women involved in the United States Sanitary Commission during the American Civil War.

Readings:

- Judith Ann Giesberg, *The Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (read **ONE** of the following chapters: “From Harvest Field to Battlefield: Rural Women and the War” **OR** “Bodies Out of Place: Women War Workers”).
- Bell Irvin Wiley, “From Reveille to Taps,” *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (**Optional reading:** “Hardtack, Salt Hose and Coffee”).

Week 11 (24 – 26 March):

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

Topic Overview: This week’s classes explore the origins of a formal labor movement in the post-bellum United States (as well as its predecessors earlier in the century).

Readings:

- Excerpts from David Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*.

Week 12 (31 March – 2 April):

WORK IN THE GILDED AGE

- STORYBOARD OR ROUGH DRAFT OF PROJECT DUE THURS., 2 APR. -

Topic Overview: This week’s classes explore the dismal plight of industrial workers in late nineteenth-century American cities – as well as the incredible wealth wrought from their labor by a handful of

magnates. We will also discuss a number of the Progressive Era reforms – both radical and moderate – that attempted to relieve workers' misery.

Readings:

- Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*.

Week 13 (7 – 9 April):

A NEW CENTURY OF WORK

- PAPER 2 DUE ON THURSDAY, 9 APRIL -

Topic Overview: This week's classes explore the rise of 'Fordism' in the twentieth-century United States; the many groups omitted from its promise; and the way in which modern work was represented in the new industrial-age medium of film.

Readings:

- Excerpts from film, *Modern Times*.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, intro. and ch. 1.

Week 14 (14 – 16 April):

WOMEN AND WORLD WAR

Topic Overview: This week's classes will explore the impact of the two world wars on the kinds of labor women performed.

Readings:

- Excerpts from film, *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.
- Continue reading Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, ch. 2.

Week 15 (21 – 23 April):

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE 'GOLDEN AGE' OF AMERICAN LABOR

Topic Overview: This week's classes will explore the rise and fall of well-paid, stable, unionized industrial jobs in America as well as the consequences of that phenomenon. We will also discuss the groups who were excluded from this period and its promise.

Readings:

- Excerpts from film, *Roger and Me*.
- Continue reading Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, ch. 3.

Week 16 (28-30 April):

SCRAPING BY IN POST-INDUSTRIAL AMERICA

- FINAL PROJECTS DUE ON TUES., 28 APR. -

- WRITTEN EVIDENCE OF INTERVIEWEE SIGN-OFF ON PROJECT DUE THURS., 30 APR. -

Topic Overview: This week's classes look at the state of work in modern America, as well as the new super-elite that has emerged from ashes of the United States' industrial era.

Readings:

- Finish Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, evaluation.

- PAPER 3 DUE ON MONDAY, 4 MAY -
