

A Tale of Two Great Depressions

AMST 30175-01

Spring 2013

TR 2-3:15

334 DeBartolo

www.nd.edu/~druccio/AMST-S13.html

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It was the worst hard time of the last century. It is now the worst hard time of the new century.

This interdisciplinary course will be team-taught by a professor of American Studies and a professor of Economics. Perspectives, materials, and methods from these respective fields will be presented, interrelated, and otherwise employed to enrich our understanding of the causes, conditions, and consequences of two Great Depressions: 1929-1941, and 2007 to the present. Throughout, we will be concerned with the similarities and differences between the two depressions and the crises that precipitated and sustained them. What was going on then, and what is going on now that has proved so decisive? How do we come to terms with the two turbulent periods in question and their connections with respect to culture, economics, politics, and society? What is the impact of these crises on the nation and its direction? How do our understandings of what happened then help us make sense of what is happening today, and what questions today assist us in analyzing a now-distant but crucial set of historical events?

In order to analyze the respective crises, we will examine historical contexts, economic factors, developments in the financial system, public policy, everyday life, documentary accounts, literary and theatrical representations, popular culture, and social dissent. Course texts include a wide range of sources: *The Great Depression* and *Letters from the "Forgotten Man," You Have Seen Their Faces*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Who Built America? Winner-Take-All Politics*, *Cosmopolis*, *Voices From the 99 Percent: An Oral History of the Occupy Wall Street Movement*, and *The Occupy Handbook*. Three documentary films will be shown in class: *The Crash of 1929*, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, and *Inside Job*. And two feature films will be streamed to the students' computers: *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Wall Street*.

Organization: The course will be conducted as a seminar, combining lectures and discussion. Therefore, it is important for all students to complete the assigned readings before each session and to participate in the classroom discussions. We expect regular and timely attendance. Grade penalties will be assessed for excessive absences (but extenuating circumstances will be considered).

Grading: There will be no examinations in this course. Instead, students will be graded on the following basis: attendance and active participation in classroom discussion (25%), six essays of three pages each spread out through the semester (40%), and a final comparative research paper 10-12 pages in length (35%). The purpose of the short essays is to “grapple” with the readings—to formulate the main themes, to raise the interesting issues, to pose serious, thoughtful, and well-written critical engagements with the course material. The final comparative paper will enable students to select and conduct research on a topic and to compare it across the two historical periods and economic depressions under investigation. Late essays and final papers will be assessed grade penalties. During the semester, we will be happy to schedule individual conferences with students to discuss relevant issues concerning course content, readings, assignments, and so on.

Academic Code of Honor: It is understood that you will honor your pledge to the Academic Code of Honor. This pledge is binding. “The pledge. . . includes an understanding that all submitted work, graded or ungraded—examinations, draft copies, papers, homework assignments, extra credit work, etc.—must be a student’s own. Any kind of academic dishonesty is a violation.”

General Learning Goals:

- 1) Critical Thinking—the ability to think critically and creatively by examining a complex issue using information, concepts, and approaches from various disciplines. This entails placing periods, phenomena, and ideas in their cultural, historical, political, and socio-economic contexts.
- 2) Communication—the importance of writing as well as conversation and dialogue. To express ideas or arguments clearly and persuasively, and to write coherently in a style appropriate to the occasion.
- 3) Informed discussion—we will develop a learning community that will assess the varied interpretations of historical periods, socio-economic conditions, political action, and cultural representations.

Specific Course Objectives:

- 1) To discern the historical context in which each depression is situated, thus gaining knowledge of historical factors and forces that have been determinative in each case.
- 2) To understand that U.S. society (along with the system of capitalism and the American Dream) is in crisis today much as it was during the 1930s, and to marshal interdisciplinary sources and materials to enhance awareness of the comparisons (similarities and differences) between the two depressions.

- 3) Relatedly, to examine the social construction of the “Great Recession” and the ramifications of such a definition and framing device. Moreover, to consider the claim and analyze the evidence and arguments that what has been called the Great Recession has now in fact become a second Great Depression.
- 4) To explore the intersection of political action, public policy, and rising inequality in the distribution of income and wealth. Also, to foreground the role of social class in American life.
- 5) To document and analyze the grass roots response to depression conditions, most notably that witnessed in the 2011 Occupy movements in cities across the country.
- 6) To examine the meaning, value, and impact of cultural representations in literature, drama, music, and film which provide ethical and aesthetic responses to each crisis.

Required Texts:

Janet Byrne, ed., *The Occupy Handbook*

Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alan Trachtenberg. *You Have Seen Their Faces*

Christopher Clark, Nancy A. Hewitt, and Roy Rosenzweig. *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History, Vol. 2: 1877 to the Present*

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*

Lenny Flank, ed., *Voices From the 99 Percent*

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All-Politics*

Robert McElvaine, *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the “Forgotten Man”*

Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941*

The Cradle Will Rock: Original Cast Recording (CD)

COURSE SCHEDULE

Part 1/Great Depression: 1929-1941

Course Introduction

[15 January]

Financial Crisis

[17 January]

The Great Crash—PBS Documentary Film

Historical Context: The Great Depression and the New Deal

[22, 24 & 29 January]

Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, chs. 1-2, 5, 7, 11

Everyday Life: Conditions and Reactions

[31 January & 5 February]

Robert McElvaine, *Letters from the "Forgotten Man"* (Intro and selected letters: numbers 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 21, 27, 36, 38, 41-42, 50, 65, 72-75, 81, 83, 106-107, 111-113, 135, 145-146, 162, 166, 170)

>Essay #1 due on 31 January

Documentary Expression

[7 & 12 February]

FSA Documentary Photography

Erskine Caldwell & Margaret Bourke-White (Intro by Alan Trachtenberg), *You Have Seen Their Faces*

Popular Culture—Feature Film: Dust Bowl and Migration

[14 & 19 February]

John Ford, *The Grapes of Wrath* (via Sakai)

Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, ch.9

Pare Lorentz, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (via YouTube)

>Essay #2 due on 14 February

Popular Culture—Theater: Staging Radical Politics

[21 & 26 February]

Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock* (libretto/handout)

The Cradle Will Rock: Original 1985 Cast Recording (CD)

Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, "Labor on Review: The Popular Front Musical Theater" (handout)

Part 2/Great Depression: 2007 to Present

Historical Context: From the Affluent Society to 9/11

[28 February and 5 & 7 March]

Roy Rosenzweig, et al., *Who Built America?* vol. 2, chs. 11-14

>Essay #3 due on 5 March

Popular Culture—Feature Film: Trading on the Street
[19 March]

Oliver Stone, *Wall Street* (via Sakai)

Political Context: Inequality
[21 & 26 March]

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All-Politics*

Financial Fiction: Lead-Up to the Crash
[28 March & 2 April]

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis: A Novel*

>Essay #4 due on 28 March

Popular Culture—Documentary Film: Economics and the Great Financial Crash
[4 & 9 April]

Charles Ferguson, *Inside Job*

Everyday Life: Conditions and Reactions
[11 April]

Lenny Flank, ed., *Voices From the 99 Percent: An Oral History of the Occupy Wall Street Movement* (sections TBA)

>Essay #5 due on 11 April

Economic Context: Debates in and about Economics
[16, 18 & 23 April]

Janet Byrne, ed., *The Occupy Handbook*, Parts I & II (chs. TBA)

Comparisons and Conclusions
[25 & 30 April]

>Essay #6 due on 25 April

Final paper due on Tuesday, 6 May (by 12:30 PM)