

# A Tale of Two Depressions

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Spring 2017

AMST 30175-01  
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2-3:15  
303 Main Building  
Internet: [www.nd.edu/~druccio/AMST-S17.html](http://www.nd.edu/~druccio/AMST-S17.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 is team-taught by professors of American Studies and 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 economic depressions: 1929-1941, and 2007 to the present. Throughout, we will be concerned with the similarities and differences between the two depressions, the crises that precipitated and sustained them, and the consequences for economics, politics, and culture. 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 the wider 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 depressions, we will examine historical contexts, economic factors, developments in the financial system, public policy, documentary accounts, literary and theatrical representations, popular culture, and social dissent. Course texts include *The Great Depression* and *Letters from the "Forgotten Man," You Have Seen Their Faces, The Great Gatsby, The Cradle Will Rock, Winner-Take-All Politics, Cosmopolis, and The Occupy Handbook, and Strangers in Their Own Land*. We will also view three documentary films—*The Crash of 1929, Inside Job, and 99%: A Collective Project*—and three feature films—*Modern Times, Wall Street, and A Face in the Crowd*

*Organization:* The course will be conducted as a seminar, combining lectures and extensive 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. 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 of their own choosing and to compare it across the two historical periods 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 all students will conduct themselves according 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.”

### *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. To examine the social construction of the “Great Recession” and the ramifications of such a definition and framing device.
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 grassroots responses to depression conditions, most notably those witnessed in the 2009-2010 rise of the Tea Party, the 2011 Occupy movement, and the 2016 presidential election.
6. To examine the meaning and impact of cultural representations of each depression in literature, music, drama, and film.

### *Required Texts*

Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock* (electronic handout)

Janet Byrne, ed. *The Occupy Handbook*

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

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

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

Arlie R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*

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

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

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **PART 1—1929-1941**

#### **Course Introduction**

[17 January]

#### **The American Dream and the 1920s/Financial Crisis**

[19 and 24 January]

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

*The Crash of 1929*—PBS Documentary Film

#### **Historical Context: The Great Depression and the New Deal**

[26 and 31 January & 2 February]

Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, chs. 1-2, 5, 7, 8 (pp. 182-95), 10-11

➤ Essay 1 due on 2 February

#### **Everyday Life: Conditions and Reactions**

[7 and 9 February]

Robert McElvaine, *Letters from the "Forgotten Man"* (intro. and selected letters: 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 21, 27, 36, 38, 41-42, 50, 65, 72-75, 81, 83, 95, 104, 106-107, 111-113, 135, 140-141, 145-146, 156, 162, 166, 170)

**Documentary Expression**

[14 and 16 February]

FSA Documentary Photography

Erskine Caldwell & Margaret Bourke-White (intro. Alan Trachtenberg), *You Have Seen Their Faces***Popular Culture—Feature Film: The American Dream and the 1930s**

[21 and 23 February]

Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (via Sakai)Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, ch. 9

➤ Essay 2 due on 23 February

**Popular Culture—Theater: Staging Radical Politics**

[28 February &amp; 2 March]

Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock* (libretto/handout)*The Cradle Will Rock: Original 1985 Cast Recording* (via Sakai)Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, “Labor on Review: The Popular Front Musical Theater” (handout)**PART 2—2007 TO PRESENT****Historical Context: Postwar Economy & Society, 1946-1974**

[7 March]

**Popular Culture—Feature Film: Trading on the Street**

[9 March]

Oliver Stone, *Wall Street* (via Sakai)

➤ Essay 3 due on 9 March

[Mid-Term Break: 11-19 March]

**Political Context: Inequality**

[21, 23, and 28 March]

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All-Politics***Financial Fiction: Lead-Up to the Crash**

[30 March]

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis: A Novel*

➤ Essay 4 due on 30 March

**Popular Culture—Documentary Film: Economics and the Great Financial Crash**  
[4 and 6 April]

Charles Ferguson, *Inside Job* (via Sakai)

**Everyday Life: Occupy Wall Street**  
[11 April]

Documentary Film—99%: A Collective Project (in-class)

**Economic Context: Debates among Economists / Analyses and Prescriptions**  
[13, 18, and 20 April]

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

➤ Essay 5 due on 13 April

**The Politics of Everyday Life**  
[25 and 27 April]

Arlie R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*

**Comparisons and Conclusions**  
[2 May]

Elia Kazan, *A Face in the Crowd*

➤ Essay 6 due on 2 May

[Final Comparative Paper: due by 12:30 pm on 8 May]