Cities in American History

A. Course Description

This course traces the evolution of urban centers in the United States from the colonial period to the present. The discussion is framed in three chronological periods that reflect distinct eras of economic and social change. Within each period, emphasis is on three broad topics: (1) the evaluation of cities within American culture as expressed in public policy, journalism, and the arts; (2) cities as arenas of contact among persons and groups of different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, and the resulting social dynamics; (3) the gradual expansion of government responsibility for the welfare of urban residents, and the resulting conflicts over the allocation of limited resources.

B. Course Development

Earlier versions of this course have been taught as Urban Studies 410 (crosslisted as History 410). It has recently been placed in catalog as Urban Studies 385 but not taught under that number because of a sabbatical leave. For inclusion in the Community Studies cluster, the course will be revised to emphasize issues of cultural adjustment and conflict and issues of societal responsibility (see below). Less emphasis will be placed on the role of cities within the U.S. economy.

C. General Education Goals

Human Experience: A course about American cities is necessarily a course about race and ethnicity in American life. The planned course will deal with multiple cultures by contrasting the English and Spanish styles of town-making; discussing European immigrants and the formation of ethnic identities; exploring black-white relations; and touching on new patterns of immigration and internal migration since 1945.

An additional theme which I'll only be able to touch on is the city as an artifact—an expression both of formal planning and of vernacular tastes and values in its neighborhoods, business districts, and open spaces.

Ethical Issues and Social Responsibility: The evolution of urban government has been a long debate about the ethics of individual vs. common responsibilities. The evolution of urban government shows the long development of alternative social philosophies that content in the 1990s: libertarian minimalism, liberal interventionism, and communitarianism. These approaches have been debated over issues of poverty and welfare, housing, and racial inequality.
Inquiry: Urban history offers rich possibilities for demonstrating the variety of sources and texts that we can use to understand social change. I expect to continue to use two assignments that focus on specific types of written documents. One assignment is an analytical comparison of two early descriptions of U.S. cities found in nineteenth century magazines. The second is an essay that places a novel about American urban life in context and analyzes its "accuracy" as history (authors can range from William D. Howells and Henry Adams to Nelson Algren and John Updike). In addition, I'll use neighborhood walking tours to demonstrate the ways that we can read urban history from the traces of the build environment.

Communication: The course will deal indirectly with questions of quantitative and graphic communication by discussing the rise of urban social science at the turn of the century, pointing out that reformed searched for new ways to analyze and present information about cities. This point can be illustrated by such works as W.E.B. DuBois's The Philadelphia Negro and Paul Kellogg's Pittsburgh Survey and brought home by discussing early social surveys of Portland.
D. Course Outline

Instructor:

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Core Reading:

The core text is Blaine Brownell and David Goldfield, Urban America: A History. It is supplemented by three other books: Kenneth Jackson, The Crabgrass Frontier, is a prize-winning analysis of the "other half" of American metropolitan development. Raymond Mohl, ed., The Making of Urban America, is a collection of recent articles. Arnold Hirsch and Raymond Mohl, eds., Urban Policy in Twentieth Century America, is a new collection of original essays whose coverage is summarized by the title.

Students will write and final exam and prepare two analytical essays chosen from a list of several possible topics and formats [I have two of the options in mind, as mentioned above, and plan to develop two others that focus on visual evidence such as building patterns and photographs].

Proposed Class Outline:

AMERICANS AND THEIR CITIES

week 1:  
- The patterns of American urbanization
- Americans think about their cities

COLONIAL CITIES

week 2:  
- The first colonial towns
- Urban society in the 18th century
- The urban influence in European America
  (Brownell and Goldfield: Chps. 1-3
  Jackson: Chp. 1
  Mohl: Goldfield and Nash articles

CITIES IN THE AGE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

week 3:  
- The triumph of New York
- Urban rivalry and growth in the Great West
  (Brownell and Goldfield: Chp. 4

week 4:  
- Immigrants and immigrant neighborhoods
- Company towns
  (Brownell and Goldfield: Chps. 5, 7
  Mohl: Bodnar and Vecoli articles)
week 5:  
  o The problem of public safety  
  o Building an urban culture  
    (Brownell and Goldfield: Chp. 6  
      Mohl: Davis, Kingsdale, and Peiss articles)

week 6:  
  o City planning and public health  
  o The suburban option  
    (Jackson: Chps 2-8  
      Mohl: Schultz article)

week 7:  
  o Bosses and machines  
  o Progressive reform and social services  
    (Brownell and Goldfield: Chp. 8  
      Mohl: Reiss article  
      Hirsch and Mohl: Katz article)

THE MODERN CITY

week 8:  
  o Black, white, and urban  
  o Racial violence and negative reform  
    (Brownell and Goldfield, Chp. 9  
      Jackson: Chp. 9-10  
      Mohl: Mohl article)

week 9:  
  o Depression, New Deal, War  
  o Housing, urban renewal, and urban crisis  
    (Brownell and Goldfield: Chps. 10-11  
      Jackson: Chps. 11-13  
      Mohl: Wade article  
      Hirsch and Mohl: Hirsch, Mohl, and Goldfield articles)

week 10:  
  o U.S. cities after immigration reform  
  o Outer cities and edge cities  
    (Brownell and Goldfield, Chp. 12-13  
      Jackson: Chps. 14-16  
      Mohl: Luckingham and Conzen articles  
      Hirsch and Mohl: Abbott article