The Great Depression: Then and Now
(REVISED 1/21/10)

Perhaps at no time since the 1930s has interest in The Great Depression been as high as it is today, and with good reason—the similarities are striking, and the differences are not as pronounced as one would have thought. It is, therefore, important that we revisit that period in our history, and see what we can learn that will help us going forward. But this course will not merely be a review of the high points of the social, cultural, political, and economic history of the Thirties; rather, it will also be an examination into how history is made, that is, how it is written, who gets to write it, and how it might be written differently. This will be accomplished by quickly reviewing the received wisdom regarding Roosevelt, the New Deal, the Alphabet Agencies, and the like, and then by critically examining certain letters, diaries, films, oral histories, and other forms of evidence to see where and how they do or do not fit into that received wisdom, revealing along the way that everyone who writes, speaks, takes a picture, or makes a movie does it with either a conscious or unconscious bias or point of view, and that that point of view influences how they define historical “truth”. This lesson will be brought to bear on journalistic treatments of the current Great Recession via weekly examination of coverage of economic and political events regarding the fiscal downturn in two newspapers with different ideological slants: The New York Times, which tends to lean Democratic and to the left, and The Wall Street Journal, which tends to lean Republican and to the right.

At the end of this course, students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the basic economic, political, social, and cultural issues of the 1930’s in America, as well as to relate how some of those issues are reflected in the current fiscal crisis. They will also be able to assess critically various types of evidence, identify the bias or point of view, and trace how that bias influences the document, photograph, film, or recollection.
Schedule of Topics and Readings

January 22, 2010: Introduction and Discussion of Syllabus

January 29, 2010: Film: The Crash of 1929

McElvaine, ed.: Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man--entire

February 5, 2010: Film: The Great Depression Part One: The Great Shake-up

Roth: The Great Depression: A Diary--entire

DISCUSSION OF FINAL PAPER PARAMETERS

February 12, 2010: Short class, 9:15 a.m.—10:30 a.m.: Individual conferences on final paper topics, by appointment

February 19, 2010: Film: Riding the Rails

Terkel: Hard Times, pp. xi--235

February 26, 2010: Film: The Civilian Conservation Corps

Terkel: Hard Times, pp. 236--462

March 5, 2010: Film: Surviving the Dust Bowl

Egan: The Worst Hard Time--entire

March 12, 2010: In-class Midterm

March 26, 2010: Film: The Plow That Broke the Plains

Steinbeck: Harvest Gypsies--entire
April 2, 2010: Film: 42nd Street
Robertson: The Orchard--entire

April 9, 2010: Film: The Grapes of Wrath
(No reading for this class)

April 16, 2010: Steinbeck: The Grapes of Wrath--entire
Final Paper Presentations (tentative)

April 23, 2010: Final Paper Presentations

April 30, 2010: Final Paper Presentations

Course Requirements and Expectations

Discussion is critical to this class, as is close attention to the readings. You should come to class prepared each week to actively engage with the reading, and with one another. From time to time we will begin class with a 15-20 minute in-class writing assignment on the reading for the week. These will be ungraded papers, but will give me a sense of how well you have read and thought, and how well you write. Those papers will be used to begin our class discussion, as needed. Preparedness and class participation will constitute 30% of your final grade.

There will be an in-class mid-term and one final paper of 15-20 pages on some aspect of the Great Depression that interests you. The mid-term will be given on March 12, and will require you to think and write analytically and critically about the works we have read to date. The final paper will be due on April 30 and will be the basis for your class presentation. A fuller description of the long paper assignment will be distributed and discussed during our February 5 class. There will be no final exam. The mid-term will constitute 20% of your grade, the final paper and your class presentation will constitute 30% of your grade.
The remaining 20% of your grade will be based upon your completion of the following weekly assignment: Each week, half the class will be assigned to identify and bring in an article on some aspect of the current economic crisis from *The New York Times*, and the other half of the class will be assigned to do the same with *The Wall Street Journal*. Both are easily available in hard copy or online; either format is acceptable. If you do not have access to a printer, email me your article by Thursday noon and I will print it out for you and bring it to class. The last portion of each class will be devoted to discussing these articles, and to analyzing the embedded biases or points of view, as well as to making any appropriate comparisons to similar issues as they arose during the 1930’s.

All books should be available at the site of the former Cook/Douglass Co-op, which is now run by the Rutgers Bookstore system and Barnes and Noble. They are also available online from Barnes and Noble, Amazon, etc. You should plan on purchasing them now, as you will be expected to have read each of them thoroughly, making extensive margin notations, in preparation for our class discussions and any in-class papers.

Perfect attendance is expected. As this class meets only once every week, if you miss one class you actually miss two. In the case of TRULY extenuating circumstances that require you to miss class, please contact me via email (stubaus@oldqueens.rutgers.edu), or by phone (my cell is 732 809 1088).

Finally, in light of the fact that class starts at 9:15 a.m. on a Friday, feel free to bring your coffee.

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