From Recession Blues to Free Market Frenzy: America in the 1970s and 1980s

What happened in the 1970s and 1980s, the period of time right before today’s college students were born? The historical epoch starting in the early 1970s and stretching up to the present has been referred to as the "age of Reagan," the era of neoliberalism, and the decline of capitalism's Golden Age. In this seminar on the political, cultural, economic and intellectual history of the 1970s and 1980s, we will ask how to define conservatism and neoliberalism, and what the relationship of each of these political visions is to the economic changes of the era. We will consider the connection between the right and the left over this period, asking how we should think about the rise of the gay rights movement, the legacy of the civil rights movement, and the evolution of feminism in the broader context of American political and economic history over this period. Finally, the course will also address some of the transnational aspects of recent American history, both the ways that ideas from other parts of the world have shaped American politics and society and the impact that the United States has had on the rest of the world. We will make use mostly of primary documents—political speeches, manifestos, music and lyrics, film, journalism and fiction—but we will also consider the ways that scholars have tried to conceptualize such recent history. While we will look at political leaders, intellectuals and the evolution of national politics, we will also consider the role of social movements, popular culture and the actions and ideas of people with no special access to power in shaping the history of the period. Throughout, we will ask: what are the connections between this history and the present? What lessons can we draw to think about our contemporary political and economic situation?

Course Objectives

This class is intended to introduce you to the history of the 1970s and 1980s, and to give you some sense of the relationship of this history to the present day. You will read widely in both primary documents and works of scholarship. You will learn the history itself, and you will also learn about the ways that historians have written and thought about this period, and the debates between people working in the field. In addition to the specific content of the class, you will also
have the chance to learn and practice important skills, such as how to read a primary source, how to do historical research, how to think critically about historical scholarship, and how to participate in a serious classroom conversation.

Requirements, Assignments and Grading

**Class Participation.** Your first responsibility in a seminar class is to attend class and to participate fully in class discussions. Engaging fully in a class discussion requires some preparation. You should arrange your schedules to allow adequate time for the reading. You should take notes as you read, taking special notice of your reaction to the text, your sense of what it is saying, the way that you think it relates to other texts that we have read, and the questions that it raises for you. Participating in discussion successfully means being prepared to introduce your ideas and interpretations, but it also means being ready to listen to others and to relate your thoughts to theirs. When in class, you will want to think about how to build on points that other people are making, responding to your peers (and to me) as you offer your own contributions.

To help facilitate class discussion, two students will volunteer to provide two or three questions for each class meeting. The questions should be emailed to me the night before the class.

Please turn all text messaging devices and cell phones off when you come into the classroom. I prefer that people not use laptops in class, since they can make it difficult for people to look at and speak to each other. If you do need to use a laptop, please do not use it to do anything in class other than take notes. If I notice that you are using a laptop for other things (for example, to check email) I’ll ask that you no longer bring it to class.

**Essays and reading journals.** You will write one midterm essay (5-8 pages each) analyzing primary documents and class readings and one longer final essay (10-15 pages).

For your midterm paper you will be asked to find a newspaper or magazine article or op-ed that deals with a subject we have discussed in class. You will then write an essay that draws on course readings to analyze the primary source that you have found.

For the final essay, you will select one of the topics that we have discussed over the course of the semester and develop a paper that deals with it in greater depth. You may write an essay that emphasizes debates between historians about a topic of your choosing (using two secondary works as well as something that we have read in class). Or you may write an essay that draws on archival research. There are many archives in and around New York City that contain materials relevant to this class (the Tamiment Library at Bobst, Columbia Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University, the Centro Archives at Hunter, and the Schomberg Library all hold collections that would be of interest). I will distribute a few sample topics that you may
select in class, but you are strongly encouraged to develop your own. All final papers should be turned in as hard copies, not submitted via email.

Finally, for each class meeting you will be expected to submit a reading journal. Reading journals should be one or two pages long. You should use them to reflect on the readings and to develop ideas and raise questions that you would like to talk about in class.

The grades for the course will be assigned as follows: class participation 30% (including the first short essay); midterm essay 30%; final essay 40%. You will also be asked to hand in work along the way, keeping track of your progress on the final paper.

**Attendance Policy**

Attendance is very important for this class as a baseline for participation. If you must miss class, you must email me and let me know why, and also make a plan to make up the missed work. More than two absences without very good reason will result in a lowered grade (one-half grade for each day).

**Late Work**

Deadlines are important for this class. Work that is submitted late will be penalized by one-half grade for each late day. If there is an emergency that demands that you submit work late, please contact me ahead of time in order to get permission.

**Statement on Plagiarism and Academic Integrity**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Suspected cases of plagiarism or other violations of academic integrity will be addressed according to Gallatin’s student discipline rules. For a full description of the academic integrity policy, please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website: [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html).

**Required Readings**

Having the books and doing the reading before class will be essential to success in the course. You should always bring a copy of the reading to class with you; if you do not buy the books, please make Xeroxes from the copies on reserve so that you have the reading with you in class. All the books can be purchased at Shakespeare and Company (716 Broadway). You may be able
to purchase copies from Amazon or ABE Books as well. Additional readings are available on NYU Classes.

Music was a very important form of communication throughout this time period. In addition to the readings, we will have a short playlist of music assigned for each class session. I will send out a link to the songs via the course listserv each week.

Book List

Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*
Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*
Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*
Michael Lewis, *Liar’s Poker*
Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*
Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties*

Class Schedule

1/29 First Class and Introductions

2/5: Conspiracy and Apocalypse

Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*, Introduction and Chapter 1


Optional Reading: Charles Reich, “The Greening of America”

2/12: Neoliberalism?

Primary Document: Milton Friedman, *Free to Choose*, Chapter 1; Lewis Powell Memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

**2/19: The Politics of Class and Race**


Watch: Episode 1 of *All in the Family*

**2/26: Feminism and Gay Rights**

Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*, Introduction, Ch. 1 – 3, 5, and Conclusion; Robert Self, *All in the Family*, Chapters 4 – 5, 7 – 8


**3/5: Urban Crisis, Fiscal Crisis**

Jeff Change, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, Prelude and Chapters 1 – 4; James O’Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, Introduction and Chapter 2


Optional Movie: *Style Wars*

**3/12: Narcissism and Malaise**


**3/14 5 PM: Midterm Essay Due**

**3/19: No Class—Spring Break**
3/26: The Coalition of the New Right

Robert Self, *All in the Family*, Chapters 10 – 12


4/2: The Reagan Presidency


Optional Movie: *Star Wars*

4/9: Deindustrialization and the Service Economy


Listen: Bruce Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*

Optional Movie: Barbara Kopple, *American Dream*

4/16: Poverty


4/23: The Rise of Finance


4/30: The Left in the 1980s (and after)

Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties*, Chapters 1 – 4, 6 – 8, Epilogue
Primary Documents: Bill Clinton, “New Covenant,” July 16, 1992; excerpts from n+1, *Occupy: Scenes from Occupied America*

Watch: How to Survive a Plague

**5/7: After the 1980s**

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, chapters TBA


**5/9: Final Essay Due, 5 PM**