Course Description

This course will trace the political economy of national state formation from the last decades of the antebellum period, through the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, and conclude with the transition to a more industrial society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Utilizing a broad survey of the literature on these periods, the course will investigate: (1) the connection between slavery and the emergence of southern separatism; (2) the impact of conflict between the plantation South and industrializing North on American state formation; (3) the failure of post-Civil War attempts to remodel the southern political economy; (4) the role of finance capital markets in industrial and western agrarian expansion and the consequent emergence of monetary issues in national politics; (5) the political economic basis of possible developmental trajectories other than the high-tariff, gold-standard one actually followed; and (6) the failure of intense conflict between labor and capital on the factory floor to move into national politics.

Course Requirements:

Students can choose between two options. Both options commit you to organize and lead the opening discussion for at least two of the sessions (usually a 30-35 minute responsibility). Option one also requires a 72 hour take-home examination, conducted as if it were a small version of a Ph.D. qualifying examination. In place of the exam, option two commits you to lead discussion in two additional sessions as well as prepare a research paper of (to be negotiated) length. You should choose this second option only if you believe you might want to publish in this area.

Required Books:


Steven Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2003)


Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996; available in paper).

Optional Books:


General Bibliography:

In addition to the required and optional books listed above, a small library built around the following volumes can supply both a general survey of the period as well as a quick reference resource. Note that some of the weekly assignments will also be drawn from these works.


Topics and Weekly Reading Assignments

First Session (January 25): Introduction to the Course--no assignment.

Second Session (February 1): General Approaches to American Political
Required Readings:


General Questions to Guide Discussion in the Second Session

1) American political development has been defined as “the study of processes through which political institutions have been reproduced or changed in the United States. While these institutions may be formally constituted structures of governance (e.g., the central state or its various departments and divisions), the essential criteria are simply their identifiability as distinct social bodies of one sort or another (e.g., political coalitions, economic cooperatives, social movements, or ideational communities). American political development involves the longitudinal investigation of such institutions, including explanations of their origin, the conditions sustaining their existence (i.e., reproducibility), and the reasons for their demise. A necessary element in such theoretical investigations is their explicit insertion into one or more of the larger thematic tapestries which attempt to encompass all or at least major parts of the American experience. Such insertion will almost always situate the case at hand with respect to similar (and possibly contrasting) institutions, either in other periods of American history or in contexts drawn from cross-national comparisons.” How would the authors we read this week react to this definition?

Recommended background:


6) James Mahoney, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Ed’s, Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Third Session (February 8): The Political Economy of Slavery and the Rise of Southern Separatism.

Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Third Session

1) What is the model of staple production and utilization of slave labor that underlies Fogel's interpretation? How, might you imagine, do the economic institutions supporting a coerced labor system structure the political claims and attitudes of elites in a slave society?

2) What, given this model of staple production, might have been the role of state policy on the construction of race distinctions, class boundaries, and the operation of slavery as a labor system?

3) These authors present very different views on the mechanism through which southern slavery replicated itself as an ensemble of social, political, and economics institutions. For some decades now, debate has raged over whether slaveholders were motivated by profit, whether slavery as a system should be considered capitalist, and whether slavery was on the verge of a "natural" extinction on the eve of the Civil War. The center of that debate has now moved into legal history. How would the last three authors answer such questions?

Recommended background:

Fourth Session (February 15): The Social and Political Origins of Secession and War.

Required readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Fourth Session

1) What are the respective weights or saliency of political, cultural, and economic
factors in these explanations of the origins of the American Civil War? Alternatively, if we were to construct counterfactuals through which war would have been avoided, how would these counterfactuals vary for each of these works?

2) Compare the sources and evidence used by each of these authors. How does each author adapt a citation style and utilize primary materials to the varying purposes and ambitions of each work? Conversely, what can you tell about the purposes and ambitions of each author from the way evidence is marshaled?

3) How much contingency is there in each of these explanations? Where is that contingency located in their respective models?

Recommended background:

2) Mark Voss-Hubbard, Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

Fifth Session (February 22): War Mobilization in the Confederate and Union States.

Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Fifth Session

1) The general focus of the discussion in this session will be a comparison of the Union and Confederate war mobilizations. What are the differences between the individual explanations for the form and content of these mobilizations? Is there anything odd, in a theoretical sense, in comparing the Union and the Confederacy as "states"?

2) Is it possible to prevent our knowledge of how the conflict actually unfolded, including the outcome, from distorting our explanation for that outcome? How, for example, do we detach ourselves from the society the Civil War made (i.e., the one we now live in) in order to dispassionately identify the contingent choices and processes which constructed the war?

Recommended background:


Sixth Session (March 1): Law, Economy, and Society.

Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Sixth Session

1) The common law has always been far more interesting to scholars than public statutes. What explains this bias? What might we be missing when we slight the law of legislatures in favor of the law of judges?

2) Friedrich Hayek described the common law as a “spontaneous order” which incrementally and efficiently adjusted legal rules to changes in society and economy. The authors we read this week present a wide variety of possibly competing factors which have shaped the common law, among them: ideological belief systems, economic philosophy, religion, communal political culture, and statist construction of citizenship. Are they really describing and explaining the same thing?

Recommended background:


Seventh Session (March 8): The Political Economy of the Post-war South.

Required Readings:

1) Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, One Kind of Freedom: The Economic

2) Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), pp. vi-x, 3-197.


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Seventh Session

1) These authors agree that the post-war South was far less developed than the northern industrial economy and grew fairly slowly through the last decades of the nineteenth century. They disagree, however, on the reasons for this stagnation. Compare their analyses by constructing counterfactuals in which the South might have prospered during this period.

2) Segregation and racism have often been assigned major roles in the underdevelopment of the post-war southern economy. What are the relative weights each of these authors places on racism in their interpretations? Would the South have developed much differently in the absence of segregated institutions? Assuming the task to be to explain the distinct trajectory of the plantation South in post-Civil War national economic and political development, how would you integrate the interpretations offered here into one theoretical frame?

Recommended background:


Eighth Session (March 15): The Growth and Politics of Cities.

Required Readings:


General Questions to Guide Discussion in the Eighth Session

1) Cronon appears to view Chicago's founding and subsequent expansion as almost a "naturalistic" process. Governmental plans and policies are almost nowhere to be seen. Beckert, on the other hand, sees the visible hands of economic elites poking their fingers in every pie. How would you reconcile the two interpretations?

2) In the context of American economic development, industrialization and urbanization are often viewed as synonymous or, at least, so closely intertwined that the one would not have been possible without the other. How might the two processes be distinguished from each other? Would a political perspective serve to analytically separate these processes or conflate them?

3) Finally, think carefully about the ways in which city, state, and nation came to have boundaries and the relationship between those boundaries and the structure of economic exchange. Which is the most "natural" unit (in the sense that its boundaries best correspond to spatial patterns of economic and social activity)?

Recommended background:

Ninth Session (March 29): Parties and Policy in the Late Nineteenth Century.

Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Ninth Session

1) We can imagine at least two competing explanations of the origins and development of the American party system: (a) a top-down, elite-driven interpretation in which the design and presentation of competing symbolic and substantive packages of policy issues are controlled by narrowly-circumscribed and insulated groups of well-placed individuals and (b) a bottom-up, popular interpretation in which opportunities for insurgency and intense party competition allow the masses to more or less control the electoral agenda. How do each of the studies read this week come down on this dichotomy?

2) From the simplest perspective, a democratic system connects people to parties to policy. How we conceive of these connections underpins how much autonomy state agents may have from the “popular will.” How much autonomy do these authors believe state agents possessed in the nineteenth century?

Recommended background:


Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Tenth Session

1) One of the most striking characteristics of the post-war period was the emergence of monetary policy as one of the major organizing features of national political conflict and competition. This emergence was all the more striking because of the rather oblique fit between monetary policy and the equally important issues raised by the reentry of the South into the political system. How do Unger, Ritter, and Friedman/Schwartz account for the prominence of financial policy and its rather distant relationship to Reconstruction as a political project?

2) Many historians view the political issues surrounding debates over the American monetary system as devoid of substance--their emergence was the result of almost a kind of
false consciousness that subsequently deflected political insurgency and unrest from the real issues associated with rapid industrialization and corporate consolidation in the late nineteenth century. Other, perhaps fewer, historians view the same debates as both a reflection of actual stresses in the economy that could be addressed in the ways "soft money" advocates suggested and thus much more connected to other substantive issues (such as public ownership of railroads and anti-trust policy). How do these authors view the material implications of monetary debates, both as critique and remedy?

Recommended background:


Eleventh Session (April 12): Industrialization.

Required Readings:


Questions to Guide Discussion for the Eleventh Session
1) With its emphasis on organizational design as the driving force behind rapid industrialization in the United States, Chandler's Visible Hand is widely regarded as the foremost interpretation of America's rise to preeminence in the world economy. But as Perrow and Roy would hasten to point out, organizational design can itself be driven by factors which lay outside the economy. What are these factors and what drives them?

2) Sklar and Chandler are unrelentingly national in their focus; the United States often appears to be an undifferentiated whole as they describe the late nineteenth century. The Political Economy of American Industrialization, on the other hand, reminds us of the wide regional variation within the United States during the late nineteenth century. How would the first two interpretations be modified if this regional variation and its political consequences were acknowledged?

3) Sklar would have us view late nineteenth century industrialists and their community as a "social movement." What is to be gained, in theoretical terms, by such an interpretation? What is to be lost?

Recommended background:


Required Readings:
Questions to Guide Discussion for the Twelfth Session

1) Each of these works addresses in some way the relationship between "structure" and "agency" in the formation of agrarian insurgency in the late nineteenth century. How would you describe the relative roles of structure and agency in each case?

2) Given the narrative descriptions and analysis presented by each author, what would you conclude were the major differences between the western and southern branches of the Populist movement?

3) Consider, for a moment, the Populist platform as a program for the national political economy. Would its adoption have solved the agrarian problem? What assumptions would you have to make about the subsequent trajectory of American political development and the characteristics of central state power for the Populist program to have solved the agrarian crisis in the late nineteenth century? What would have been the impact, if any, on industrial expansion and the technological adaptation of the American economy to world competition?

Recommended background:


Thirteenth Session (April 26): Labor, Industrialization, and Political Development.

Required Readings:

Questions to Guide Discussion for the Thirteenth Session

1) What is the role of labor, state policy, and national politics in each of these works? What does the role assigned to each of these say about the author's interpretation of the importance of state policy in American industrialization?

2) Labor historians tend to view the American development through the lens of events and conflicts within the floor of a northeastern or midwestern factory. In this tendency, they might remind you of the works by Chandler and Sklar. What is gained through this conflation of paradigmatic site-privileging and an ostensible national experience? What is lost?

Recommended background:


Fourteenth Session (May 3): Overview.

Date for Take-home Examination: (to be arranged).