

The History of Capital, Labor, and Democracy, 1877 to Present

Professor Jefferson Cowie

Spring 2026

Course Description

This course concentrates on the histories of capital, labor, and democracy: a combination of themes that force us to confront the inequalities in both economic and political power in US history. We will develop a historical understanding of the phenomenal rise of the modern American economy, the problems and opportunities it presents for democratic practice, and how both relate to the aspirations and power of the working-class majority. This is a course in critical thinking about the American experience. If successful, it will place you in your own struggle over the meaning of the past and help prepare your mind for a life of engaged citizenship.

Course Readings

Students are responsible for purchasing any readings below that are not available online. All other readings in the syllabus will be provided. Readings not linked in the syllabus will be uploaded to the learning management system.

1. Lichtenstein, Nelson. *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. Princeton University Press, 2013. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
2. Loomis, Erik. *A History of America in Ten Strikes*. The New Press, 2020. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
3. Silva, Jennifer M. *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America*. Oxford University Press, 2019. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Watch all course lectures.
- Complete all course readings.
- Submit five short papers (500 words each).
- Contribute to nine discussion boards.
- Participate in at least three Q&As.
- Complete a 15-page (~3,750 words) research paper or project of appropriate rigor.
- Complete a course evaluation. (A survey link will be sent to your Gettysburg email during week eleven of the semester.)

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be able to explain the changing structure of economics, the way it shaped production and distribution, and how that is all inextricably intertwined with power, work, politics, and social life in the United States.
2. Students will understand the causes and consequences of macro- and micro-developments of everyday life as well as the sweeping one-of-a-kind changes in politics and culture.
3. Students will exercise and sharpen critical reasoning skills and learn to craft logical and clear arguments.

Class Schedule

Week One: February 5: Capital, Labor, and Democracy: An Introduction to Key Terms and Ideas

Readings

- Seth Rockman, "The Unfree Origins of Capitalism," in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives & New Directions*, ed. Cathy Matson (Penn State Press, 2006), 335–361.
- James Oakes, "Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89 (Spring 2016): 195–220. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
 - First post due: Sunday, February 8
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 11
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Week Two: February 12: Market and Politics in the Nineteenth Century

Readings

- Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2019), Introduction and Chapter 2.
- Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, Chapters 1 and 2.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - First post due: Sunday, February 15
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 18

- Short Paper One due: Wednesday, February 18
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Three: February 19: Political Ideologies and the Labor Question in the Gilded Age

Readings

- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapter 3. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- William Graham Sumner, "On a New Philosophy: That Poverty Is the Best Policy," in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York, 1883), 13–27.
- Sven Beckert, "Democracy and Its Discontents: Contesting Suffrage Rights in Gilded Age New York," *Past & Present* 174 (Feb 2002): 116–157. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Labor primary source documents:
 - The Omaha Platform of the Populist Party, 1892. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
 - Preamble to the Constitution of the Knights of Labor, 1881. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
 - "'Pure and Simple': Making the Case for Trade Unionism," 1883. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
 - Eugene Debs, Speech Accepting the Nomination of the Socialist Party, 1912, excerpt. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
 - Preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1908. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
- Review the Labor Ideologies table in the Week Three module.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
 - First post due: Sunday, February 22
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 25
 - Final Project/Paper Question due: Wednesday, February 25
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final project or paper will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing.
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Week Four: February 26: Is the American Working Class Different from Other Industrializing Countries?

Readings

- William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1991), Chapter 3. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 1–24. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 154–173. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - First post due: Sunday, March 1
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 4
 - Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, March 4
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Five: March 5: Labor in the Progressive Era

Readings

- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapters 4 and 5. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Introduction. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
 - First post due: Sunday, March 8
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 11
- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due: Wednesday, March 11
 - Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND

- Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final project/paper.
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Week Six: March 12: The New Economy: Capital Takes Command

Readings

- *The Great Depression*, episode 1, "A Job at Ford's," 1993, PBS. ([A link to this episode can be found in the Week Six module.](#))
- Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Monthly Review Press, 1998), Chapters 4 and 5. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- David Brody, "The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism," in *Workers in Industrial America* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - First post due: Sunday, March 15
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 18
 - Short Paper Three due: Wednesday, March 18
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Seven: March 19: The New Deal

Readings

- Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2016), Prologue and Introduction. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapter 6. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Chapter 1. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven

- First post due: Sunday, March 22
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 25
 - Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, March 25
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Eight: March 26: Postwar Compromise

Readings

- Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Temple University Press, 2000), Introduction and Part One. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapter 7. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Chapters 2 and 3. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Project/Paper Preview due: Wednesday, April 1
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper
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Week Nine: April 2: Civil Rights as a Labor Issue

Readings

- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Chapters 4 and 5. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Lawrence Glickman, "How White Backlash Controls American Progress," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2020.
- *At the River I Stand* (1993). ([This film can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - First post due: Sunday, April 5
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 8

- Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, April 8
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Ten: April 9: The 1970s and the Blue Collar Backlash

Readings

- Lewis F. Powell "The Attack on the Free Enterprise System" ("Powell Memo"), 1971. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1970.
- Jefferson Cowie, "The 'Hard Hat Riot' Was a Preview of Today's Political Divisions," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2020.
- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Chapter 6. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapter 8. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Rough Draft due: Wednesday, April 15
 - Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages (at minimum) of your final paper.
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Week Eleven: April 16: Neoliberalism and Labor Organizing

Readings

- Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, Chapter 7. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Loomis, *Ten Strikes*, Chapters 9 and 10. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine
 - First post due: Sunday, April 19
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 22

Week Twelve: April 23: Populism, Trump, and the Future**Readings**

- Jennifer M. Silva, *We're Still Here*, all. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Final Project/Paper due: Wednesday, April 29
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Course and Program Policies

It is the responsibility of students to know, understand, and abide by course and program policies.

For a full overview of program policies, review the Gettysburg College–Gilder Lehrman Institute Student Handbook.

Course correspondence

Correspondence with faculty and administrators should be formal. Include a subject line, addressee, and closing. Put the name and number of your course in the subject line.

Plagiarism and AI

This program uses Turnitin to check for instances of plagiarism and AI. Plagiarism and papers composed fully or in part by AI will not be tolerated. This includes self-plagiarism. A student caught plagiarizing or composing papers with AI for the first time may receive a zero on the assignment. A student caught plagiarizing or composing with AI for a second time may be permanently removed from the program.

Your section professor will set the policies for use of AI for research or purposes other than composing your papers.

Late work

Assignments should be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on the due date unless otherwise specified by your section professor. If you think you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, it is your responsibility to contact your section professor to ask for an extension before the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% if less than a week late, 10% if one week late, and an additional 10% for each subsequent week.

Grading scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade	Grade Points
A	95%–100%	4
A-	90%–94%	3.67
B+	87%–89%	3.33
B	84%–86%	3
B-	80%–83%	2.67
C+	77%–79%	2.33
C	74%–76%	2
C-	70%–73%	1.67
D+	67%–69%	1.33
D	64%–66%	1
D-	60%–63%	.67
F	0%–59%	0

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers (25% of grade – 5% per short paper)

Students will complete five short papers. Each should be approximately 500 words long. The purpose of these papers is not to merely summarize weekly readings but to demonstrate that you have read them analytically and contextually. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings. If you need help getting started, you can complete one of the options listed below.

Complete a thesis identification - Select one of your assigned readings and focus on identifying the thesis as well as the evidence the authors use to support that thesis.

Complete a primary source evaluation - Evaluate a primary source from the Gilder Lehrman Collection or elsewhere. Primary sources must be relevant to that week's readings. Keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is the author of this document?
- Who was their intended audience?
- How might both author and audience impact the content of the document?
- For what reason was this document created?

Complete a book review - Focus on one of the secondary sources assigned in this course and critique it. Keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the author's argument?
- Does the author adequately support their argument?
- Are you convinced of their argument? If not, why not?
- How does this source fit into the larger discussion of its topic?

Discussion Board Posts (18% of grade – 2% per discussion board)

Students will interact in 9 discussion boards in this course. Discussion boards are led by section professors, who will provide specific instructions for participation in their section. You are required to make at least one post to each discussion board and respond to **at least two other students**.

Question-and-Answer Sessions (15% of grade – 5% per reaction)

Throughout the semester the lead professor of each course will conduct five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, you must complete a 1–2-paragraph Q&A Reaction within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If you cannot attend three of the five Q&As, you may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 500-word review of topics covered for each missed Q&A. **Makeup assignments must be completed within two weeks of the missed Q&A.**

Final Project/Paper (42% of grade)

For the final assignment of each course, you will choose to complete either a research project or 15-page research paper. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts and podcasts, documentary editing and transcription, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans *will not* be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. Your section professor must approve research projects.

The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred.

Both final assignment options require you to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that you do not yet know the

answer to. You will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether you choose to pursue a project or paper, finals are scaffolded throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows time to incorporate instructor feedback into assignments.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Project/Paper Proposal (2%)

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final project or paper. This should include a description of the project or paper you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be super specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing) and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (what is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%)

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan on utilizing in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Project or Paper Preview (5%)

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Rough Draft (10.5%):

For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Final Product (21%):

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers.