

SS 229b: Theoretical and Quantitative Dimensions of Historical Development
Course Syllabus – Spring Quarter / 2025
Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences
California Institute of Technology

Course Instructor

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Course Description

This course is designed for second- and third-year Social Science Ph.D. candidates who are interested in (a) writing a dissertation in economic history, (b) applying economic history tools and analysis to their current dissertation plan, or (c) learning more about the field of economic history. Even though the focus of this class is the United States, we will read some foundational papers whose focus is not the U.S. This class builds on its Winter quarter counterpart, SS229A. The main goal of the course is to involve students in academic research.

Course Description

Each class will consist of a brief, 15-minute student presentation (after Week 1), followed by a guided discussion or lecture. At various points during the quarter, I will present best-practices regarding generative AI in the research production function.

Everyone is expected to read the assigned papers, come up with three discussion slides on each paper: what is good or novel about the paper (most important), what is one (perceived) weakness of the paper, and a suggestion for improvement or ideas for further research. Additionally, each student will complete **two** referee reports on recent job market papers in economic history, on a topic of their choosing. You can find all of the readings online.

Topics

- Slavery, reconstruction, inequality
- Institutions, Culture, and Geography
- Immigration and Migration
- Transportation
- Human Capital
- Health
- Depression
- Government
- Urbanization
- Financial Development

*Reading List***1. Slavery, reconstruction, inequality**

- a. Acemoglu & Wolitzky: The economics of labor coercion
- b. Naidu: American slavery and labour market power
- c. Hilt: Revisiting Time on the Cross
- d. Olmstead & Rhode: Biological innovation and productivity growth
- e. Gonzalez: Start-up nation?
- f. Logan: Do black politicians matter?
- g. Engerman & Fogel: Explaining the relative efficiency of slave agriculture
- h. Ager et al: The intergenerational effects of a large wealth shock
- i. Collins & Wanamaker: African American intergenerational economic mobility
- j. Derenoncourt: Can you move to opportunity?
- k. Logan & Parman: The national rise in residential segregation
- l. Akbar et al: Racial segregation in housing markets and erosion of black wealth
- m. Aaronson et al: The effects of the 1930s HOLC redlining maps

2. Institutions, Culture, and Geography

- a. Bleakley & Lin: Portage and path dependence
- b. Gallup et al: Geography and economic development
- c. Sachs: Tropical underdevelopment
- d. Engerman & Sokoloff: Factor endowments, institutions, and differential paths
- e. Engerman & Sokoloff: Institutions, factor endowments, and paths of development
- f. Dell et al: What do we learn from weather?
- g. Acemoglu & Dell: Productivity differences between and within countries
- h. Giuliano & Nunn: Understanding cultural persistence and change
- i. Acemoglu et al: Colonial origins of comparative development
- j. Acemoglu et al: Reversal of fortune
- k. McArthur & Sachs: Institutions and geography: comment on AJR
- l. Nunn & Wantchekon: The slave trade and the origin of mistrust in Africa
- m. North: Institutions
- n. Clark: Why isn't the whole world developed?
- o. Alston: Beyond institutions: beliefs and leadership
- p. Alesina et al: On the origins of gender roles

3. Immigration and migration

- a. Abramitzky & Boustan: Immigration in American economic history
- b. Abramitzky et al: A nation of immigrants
- c. Borjas: Self-selection and the earnings of immigrants
- d. Borjas: The economics of immigration
- e. Tabellini: Gifts of the immigrants, woes of the natives
- f. Card: The impact of the Mariel boatlift on the Miami labor market
- g. Abramitzky et al: Europe's tired, poor, huddled masses
- h. Hornbeck, & Naidu: When the levee breaks
- i. Collins: Whens the tide turned
- j. Bazzi et al: Frontier culture
- k. Salisbury: Selective migration, wages, and occupational mobility

- l. Ward: Internal migration, education and intergenerational mobility
- m. Boustan: Was postwar suburbanization “white flight”?

4: Transportation

- a. Donaldson: Gains from market integration
- b. Fogel: Quantitative approach to the study of railroads in American economic growth
- c. Fogel: Notes on the social savings controversy
- d. Redding & Turner: Transportation costs
- e. Donaldson & Hornbeck: Railroads and American economic growth
- f. Donaldson: Railroads of the Raj
- g. Hornbeck & Rotemberg: Railroads, market access, and aggregate productivity growth
- h. Atack et al: Did railroads induce or follow economic growth?

5: Human Capital

- a. Goldin: America’s graduation from high school
- b. Feigenbaum & Tan: The return to education in the mid-20th century
- c. Andrews: Local effects of land grant colleges on agricultural innovation and output
- d. Bound & Turner: Going to war and going to college
- e. Cascio et al: From Brown to busing
- f. Aaronson & Mazumder: The impact of Rosenwald schools on Black achievement
- g. Goldin & Katz: The shaping of higher education {JEP}

6: Health

- a. Costa: Health and the economy in the United States from 1750 to the present {JEP}
- b. Zimran: Sample selection bias and height trends
- c. Alsan & Wanamaker: Tuskegee and the health of Black men
- d. Cutler & Miller: The role of public health improvements in health advances
- e. Almond: Is the 1918 Influenza Pandemic over?
- f. Bleakley: Disease and development
- g. Clay et al: Controlling tuberculosis?
- h. Clay et al: Pollution, infectious disease, and mortality

7: Great Depression

- a. Fishback: How successful was the New Deal
- b. Romer: The Great Crash and the onset of the Great Depression
- c. Hausman: Fiscal policy and economic recovery
- d. Romer: The nation in Depression
- e. Margo: Employment and unemployment in the 1930s
- f. Muller: Time preference and the Great Depression
- g. Benmelech et al: Financial frictions and employment during the Great Depression
- h. Fishback & Kachanovskaya: The multiplier for Federal spending in the states
- i. Hill: Love in the time of the Depression

8: Government

- a. Sylla et al: Banks and state public finance in the new republic
- b. Wallis: Constitutions, corporations, and corruption
- c. Lamoreaux & Wallis: Economic crisis
- d. Hall & Sargent: Debt and taxes in eight US wars
- e. Hall & Sargent: Fiscal discriminations in three wars

9: Urbanization

- a. Serafinelli & Tabellini: Creativity over time and space
- b. Michaels: Urbanization and structural transformation
- c. Baum-Snow: Did highways cause suburbanization?
- d. Hornbeck & Keniston: Barriers to urban growth and the great Boston fire of 1872
- e. Ager et al: How the 1906 San Francisco earthquake shaped economics
- f. Shertzer et al: Zoning and the economic geography of cities

Week 10: Financial Development

TBD

Wellness Policy

If you find yourself overwhelmed or encountering other personal challenges during the term, please reach out to me so we can develop a plan for you to pursue success in this course in a healthy way. In addition, I encourage you to utilize Caltech's resources.

Students with Documented Disabilities

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Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with Caltech Accessibility Services for Students (CASS). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact CASS as soon as possible, since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. For more information: <https://cass.caltech.edu/>, cass@caltech.edu. If you are having difficulties with access or other challenges in the class you think might be related to a disability, but do not yet have a diagnosis, please feel free to reach out to CASS to learn more about resources.

My Status as a "Responsible Employee"

As a faculty member, I am required to notify the Institute's Equity and Title IX Office when I become aware of discrimination, sexual harassment, or sex- or gender-based misconduct involving our community members. If one of my students shares such an experience with me, I can help connect them to support resources but will not be able to keep that information confidential as part of fulfilling my responsibility to make sure my students are offered the opportunity to access information and support by the Institute. For more information, you can email equity@caltech.edu, go to equity.caltech.edu, or review the Institute's *Sex- and Gender-Based Misconduct Policy*.

If you have experienced such prohibited conduct and want to report it or speak to a confidential resource, consult the [Equity and Title IX Office's webpage on reporting](#) for guidance.

Academic Resources for Students

- Online Learning: Resources, [iPad Loaner Program](#), FAQs, and more for students learning online; <https://learn.caltech.edu/>
- Tutoring: The undergraduate dean's office provides a free peer tutoring service; If the course isn't listed, students can talk with the dean's office to arrange for a tutor; <https://deans.caltech.edu/>
- Writing: The Hixon Writing Center provides professional writing tutors as well as peer tutors, individual and group writing space, and additional resources; <https://writing.caltech.edu>
- Registrar & FERPA: The registrar can answer questions about degree progress, privacy of student records, and course enrollment procedures; <https://registrar.caltech.edu>. The website also lists *Option Representatives* for option-specific advising, policies, and information.
- Library: Borrow books, retrieve journal articles, receive guidance about research; <https://library.caltech.edu/>
- Dean of Graduate Studies: Wide-ranging assistance addressing issues (academic and other) for graduate students; <https://gradoffice.caltech.edu>

Additional Resources for Students

- Student Wellness Center: Wide variety of health and wellbeing services; <https://wellness.caltech.edu/>
- Counseling Services: Free for all students, regardless of insurance plan; <https://counseling.caltech.edu>
- Occupational Therapy: Individual sessions and consultations on building healthy habits and routines, time management, planning and organization, and more. Free for all students; <https://ot.caltech.edu>
- Center for Inclusion and Diversity: Resources concerning navigating diversity and inclusion, including staff who can speak with students about challenges of harassment and discrimination; <https://diversity.caltech.edu/>
- Title IX: Caltech's Title IX Coordinator (titleix@caltech.edu) works with students on issues related to sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and sex discrimination; <https://titleix.caltech.edu/>
- Caltech Accessibility Services for Students: The Accessibility Services Specialist works with students with temporary medical conditions, or mental, physical or learning disabilities on accommodation requests and services; <https://cass.caltech.edu>
- Residential Support: Resident Associates (RAs) and Residential Life Coordinators (RLCs) are also resources for TAs and students; <https://residentialexperience.caltech.edu/>
- Career Advising and Experiential Learning: Provides resources to help students make career decisions and implement career plans; <https://career.caltech.edu/>