My goal in this class is to give an exposure to the literature in economic history. To write a good dissertation in economic history you need to understand what has been written previously. Without that foundation you will struggle in this field or any other field. But you should be ‘forward looking,’ while taking this course. You should be writing down ideas for research or discussing them with me and your colleagues. Once the Spring quarter is done you should begin working on those ideas. In my view, summer is the perfect time to write a second-year paper. At that point, you have had full exposure to a set of courses.

Throughout the course we will analyze a series of topics, mostly in European Economic History, but a few in American economic history. The histories of these major economies are often studied separately. But they share some similarities and it is valuable to study them side-by-side. The topics will broadly include (i) institutions and development, (ii) markets and trade, (iii) inequality and public policy. Each class will focus on two papers on the reading list below. The papers are paired by topic.

Our classes will be organized as a seminar with discussion of the papers. I will assign the papers to one student. They will give a brief overview, including discussion of its strengths (i.e. what we learn from this paper) and perhaps its limitations. The presenter should also discuss where research on this topic could go next, that is how to expand knowledge on this issue. The student presenter should provide slides summarizing their points, which they can upload on canvas before class. Note I will interrupt often to ask questions and make this conversational. Other students should do the same. That should be easy with a small class. So in sum, I expect everyone to offer some thoughts on each paper in the discussion.

At the end of the quarter, I want you to write an essay where you summarize some aspect of the literature, and propose an idea of how you can extend that literature. It could read almost like an introduction to a paper. Note, you don’t need to do the analysis yet. Just be clear on what is known and how your proposed paper could add.

Course grading will be based on your essay, your slides examining papers, and your presentations in class.

Course schedule

Week 1

Introduction to course

Discussion of my former students and the publications that came out of their dissertation.

Glance at the following:
Theme 1: institutions and development in history

Week 2, April 6:


Week, April 8:


Week 3, April 13:


Week 3, April 15:


Week 4, April 20:


Week 4, April 22


Theme 2: markets, trade, and colonialism

Week 5, April 27


Yanfeng GU and James Kai-sing KUNG, Malthus Goes to China: The Effect of ‘Positive Checks’ on Grain Market Development, 1736-1910,

Week 5, April 29


Week 6, May 4


Week 6, May 6


Week 7, May 11


Week 7, May 13


**Theme 3: Inequality, labor markets, and redistribution**

Week 8, May 18


Week 8, May 20


Week 9, May 25


Week 9, May 27


Week 10, June 1


Week 10, June 3
