

HISTORY 247 / UW-MADISON / FALL 2003

AMERICAN BUSINESS HISTORY

Prof. Dunlavy

In a Nutshell . . .

Content: We will explore the dramatic changes that have occurred in American business since the mid-eighteenth century, situating these changes in the context of the history of American capitalism more broadly. Throughout the semester, we will pay special attention to business as a social world, to the role of government, and to that key institution of American business -- the corporation.

Skills: You will learn key concepts for analyzing change in American business and will have ample opportunity in writing assignments to sharpen your powers of critical thinking and historical analysis.

Worldview: The course will encourage you to "de-naturalize" the world of American business as we explore the material and social forces that have shaped it.

Lecture meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:00-5:15 p.m., in 2650 Humanities.

Course Goals

Three Themes

This lecture course explores the dramatic changes that have marked American capitalism since the mid-eighteenth century. Throughout the semester, we will emphasize three themes:

changes in the world of business as a social world;

changes in the role of government, without which business life would be -- in Thomas Hobbes' words -- "nasty, brutish, and short" (witness the problems of Enron, WorldCom, etc.); and
the increasing importance and power of the corporation.

Three Questions

As we explore these themes in the lectures, the readings, and your writing assignments, we will address three broad issues:

the facts: how the nature of American business changed from one era to the next;
causation: why these changes (and not others) took place; and
consequences: what impact -- social, political, economic -- did these changes have.

Three Goals

The course is designed to pursue three goals:

to give you basic factual knowledge of changes in American capitalism from one era to the next;

to sharpen your intellectual skills -- that is, to improve your powers of

critical analysis (your ability to read closely, to reason soundly, and to express your thoughts clearly in writing); and

historical analysis (your ability to analyze and interpret complex, dynamic events with imperfect information -- if you do well in the course, you may list that valuable skill on your résumé).

to perform the mental feat of "de-naturalizing" American business. As you develop an understanding of the forces that pushed change in certain directions but not others, you will begin to see that "business as we know it" is the product of specific historical forces, not an inevitable, pre-determined outcome. This insight, in turn, helps in making sense of the changes underway in American capitalism today and of the extent to which human agency matters.

Readings

Required Readings

The assigned readings (click "Schedule" link above) are of two kinds: our focus will be on "primary sources"-- documents produced by participants in or observers of the historical events that we will study -- while a textbook provides valuable background or contextual reading. ("Secondary sources" are the writings of historians that are based on primary sources; textbooks are "tertiary sources" in that they synthesize secondary sources.)

The primary sources take the form of articles, essays, or excerpts from books written either by business people or by other observers about controversial developments in American business. Primary sources provide grist for the historian's mill. Read them carefully; think not only about what a reading tells you but about who wrote it and why they did so. Discussion sections will focus closely on the primary sources.

The textbook, available for purchase and on reserve, is:

Mansel G. Blackford and K. Austin Kerr, *Business Enterprise in American History*, 3d. ed. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994).

You will be assigned two or three chapters at a time. Read and digest them quickly; then review them in subsequent weeks, as indicated on the Schedule. Bring questions to lecture and section or to me in office hours.

Recommended Readings

If you plan to work actively to improve your analytical and writing skills -- and I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to do so in this class, I recommend the following excellent works:

William Strunk, Jr., and E.G. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3d or later edition. This gem, long a classic, is only 70-some pages long; memorize it! It is available at UBS and also online; click the title above.

M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, 4th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1994).

Richard Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing About History* (Scott, Foresman and Co., 1989).

Written Work

Writing Assignments

Even in a digital age, it is impossible to overstate the importance of being able to write well. You may have the most interesting, innovative thoughts in the world, but if you cannot express them well in writing, no one will know. But, more than that, writing is an indispensable tool in sharpening your analytical skills, since it is usually in the process of putting your ideas on paper that you figure out where your ideas work and where they don't. Virtually anyone can improve her or his writing (and, therefore, thinking). And don't assume, because your native language is English, that you are fluent. Everyone can improve his/her writing and most of us need to work at it.

You will have several opportunities to hone your skills this semester -- three papers, occasional section assignments, and a blue book exam. All ask you to apply your powers of critical thinking to the lectures and assigned readings and then to convey the results on paper. Writing good essays requires you to listen/read closely and to think critically, historically, creatively, and coherently (more on these qualities in lecture).

Each week, you will have two or three keywords to master; these are drawn from the lectures and primary-source readings. Your goal is to be able to define or describe each term, place it in time (by date or decades), and to explain its significance in American business history -- and to do so in a paragraph that takes about five minutes to write (e.g., on the final exam). We will work in several opportunities for you to practice writing keyword responses over the course of the semester. Note that you may reach a complete list of the keywords by clicking on any instance of "Keywords" on the "Schedule" of lectures and reading assignments.

The three paper assignments (constituting 10%, 15%, and 25% of your course grade) require you to digest and synthesize progressively more primary sources, and their maximum length increases accordingly from three to seven pages. You should bump up against these limits, and you may find the page limits unduly constraining. If so, know that they are intended to encourage the valuable habit of expressing your thoughts directly and succinctly. Prune and pare your draft until it meets the page limit and its quality will improve.

The final exam (25% of the course grade) will be two-hour, closed-book, blue-book exam, which will take place on Friday, December 19, at 7:45 a.m. at a location to be announced later. You will be asked to write brief IDs on six of the keywords and to respond to two essay questions. The Schedule includes a few keywords each week; the IDs on the final will be drawn from this cumulative pool. On Tuesday, December 9, we will hand out in lecture the two essay questions that will appear on the final exam.

Plagiarism is Theft!

From Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (10th ed.) -- plagiarize: "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own; . . . present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source."

Plagiarism has become an increasingly serious offense as Western society has become increasingly property-oriented. The very notion of "stealing" ideas or words implies private-property rights in them (a concept made explicit in the term intellectual property rights, a matter of great controversy in the computer/media world today). If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please feel free to talk with me, with your teaching assistant, or with the Dean of Students, 117 Bascom (3-5700). Plagiarism can result in expulsion from the university -- not a good way to begin the rest of your life!

Here are my general tips on avoiding plagiarism:

Notice that plagiarism encompass ideas as well as words. This means that you need to document (by citing your sources in footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetically) not only the source of quotations (i.e., borrowed words) but also the source of borrowed ideas that you express in your own words.

If you have troubling deciding what you need to document and what does not require it, that's because it is not always easy to know. A good rule of thumb: if in doubt, document.

Obtaining an entire paper from someone else is completely beyond the pale. And stupid, too--unless you're wasting someone else's money on your college education and are looking for a way to bail of the university.

Grades

Breakdown

Your grade in this course will be calculated as follows:

Participation in sections 25%
Writing assignments

Paper #1 (max. 3 pp.) 10%
Paper #2 (max. 4 pp.) 15%
Paper #3 (max. 7 pp.) 25%
Final exam (blue book) 25%
Total 100%

For a discussion of performance expectations in the discussion sections and on the writing assignments, follow the links below to "Sections" and "Written Work."