THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF BLACK NATIONALISM: 1914-1974

HISTORY 187
Professor Mary F. Corey
Spring 2017

TENTATIVE SYLLABUS

Historiography has gone in and out of favor as a way to understand historical fact and the process of historical writing. At some point between 1960 and 1975 in both Western Europe and the U.S. history took a turn toward theory. This turn has reawakened an interest in historiography -- that is the history of historical narrative over time.

In this course we will examine historical writing concerning black nationalism from Marcus Garvey until the devolution of the Black Panther Party in the mid-seventies. This study will help students to understand the evolution of historical practice concerning a specific subject. We engage in this study not to determine how historical practice ought to be done (that is the patronizing of past historians for having got it wrong), but rather as a way to develop a real curiosity about why these narratives of the past sometimes look so strange to us and why they seemed so persuasive to the particular audience for whom they were intended.

The historiography of black nationalism poses its own particular problems as does the historiography of the “sixties.” Historians on the left often offer despairing accounts if failure and decline. This story tends to separate the so called “good left” from the “bad left.” The story of black nationalism in this narrative fits squarely inside of the “bad left.”

In some ways historiography can be understood as the study of errors and superseeded theories. The historiography of race itself is a minefield of errors – including a variety of consciously and unconsciously racist ruminations on the meaning of blackness.
CERTAINLY BLACK NATIONALISM HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT BY RACISTS WHO CONDEMN IT OR NEO-LIBERALS WHO ARGUE THAT IT IS BAD STRATEGY. THIS IS LOW HANGING FRUIT AND WE WILL NOT BE PICKING IT. RATHER WE WILL CONFINE OUR STUDY TO CREDIBLE HISTORICAL THINKERS WHO HAVE OFFERED THOUGHTFUL CONSIDERATIONS OF OUR TOPIC. MANY OF THESE NARRATIVES ARE WRITTEN BY ACTIVISTS THEMSELVES WHICH PRESENTS IT OWN SET OF PROBLEMS. THESE NARRATIVES NEED TO BE READ WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PITFALLS OF ORAL HISTORY AS WELL AS THE SUBJECTIVITY OF HISTORY RELATED BY THE HISTORICAL ACTORS THEMSELVES.

AS HISTORIANS WE MUST ALWAYS PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO WHAT IS NOT SAID -- THE ELISIONS, OMISSIONS, SILENCES AND CHANGES OVER TIME IN THE WAY THE STORY OF BLACK NATIONALISM HAS BEEN TOLD IN THE UNITED STATES.

READING LIST

STOKELY, CARMICHAEL “TOWARD BLACK LIBERATION” (scan)
MARY F. COREY, “CLASS, CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY: THE ANTIBELLUM RACE GAME” (scan)
HAROLD CRUSE, “REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM AND THE AFRO-AMERICAN” (scan)
PERO GAGLO DAGBOVIE, AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY RECONSIDERED
THOMAS C. HOLT, MAJOR PROBLEMS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY, (PP 251-311; PP. 313-388)
CLR JAMES, “THE REVOLUTIONARY ANSWER TO THE NEGRO PROBLEM” (scan)
CHARLES E. JONES, SELECTIONS FROM THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY RECONSIDERED, (scan)
ROBIN KELLEY, FREEDOM DREAMS
KENNETH KUSSNER & JOE W. TROTTER, AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN HISTORY
WILSON JEREMIAH MOSES, “VARIETIES OF BLACK HISTORICISM: ISSUES OF ANTI-MODERNISM AND PRESENTISM” (scan)
REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND ANDREW BACEVICH, THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY, EXCERPT, (scan)
ROI OTTLAY, “THE GARVEY MOVEMENT DESCRIBED: UP, YOU MIGHTY RACE” (scan)
BRENDA GAYLE PLUMMER, EXCERPT FROM *IN SEARCH OF POWER: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE ERA OF DECOLONIZATION*. (scan)
KATE TURABIAN, *A MANUAL FOR WRITERS*

Students need to order The Kelley, the Dagbovie and the Turabian books. All other readings will be scanned and will be assigned weekly. We will also be utilizing documentary film as a form of visual historiography.

This coursework will consist of student led weekly discussions of the reading, workshops on historical writing, a library research session and two historiographical papers (10 pages each.)

Ideally this course, taught in the spring, can be continued with a 191D course in fall on the same subject thus enabling students to select a primary research topic by the end of the 187, work on the research over the summer and write the paper in the 191 in fall. However, this class can be taken on its own.

Weekly assignments to come.

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