

HIST 408/508: BIOLOGY, ECOLOGY, AND WORLD HISTORY (COLLOQUIUM)

Prof. Ian F. McNeely – University of Oregon – Fall 2007
CRNs: 15400/15403

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Course description

In this class we pose the questions: Do biology and ecology drive human history? Or do humans control their fates through conscious agency? Is it nostalgic, even nonsensical, to speak of human history apart from its organismic and environmental determinants?

This is a reading-intensive colloquium emphasizing engagement with secondary texts in world history. Some of them are classics in this burgeoning field; others offer exciting new perspectives. We won't read each book cover to cover but the load will be heavy, on the order of 250 pages a week. On the other hand, the assignments focus exclusively on processing the readings. There is no final exam and no term paper. No prior knowledge of biology or ecology is assumed. Some previous exposure to college-level history is helpful.

Assignments

- Weekly reading journal (50%)
- Unannounced quizzes (30%)
- Class participation (20%)

The *weekly reading journal* will help you to begin analyzing the readings before class; this in turn will serve to jump-start class discussion and help you build up a stock of knowledge as the course progresses. More details on the journal are given immediately below. The *unannounced quizzes* will be objective in format, designed simply to test your comprehension of the material. *Class participation* is a subjective grade based on your contributions to in-class discussions. I make brief notes on each student after each class, and you are welcome to ask me for these. I stress not only the quantity, but also the quality, of your participation.

Weekly reading journal

Journal entries are due every week in class starting in week 2. Each entry should be three solid, double-spaced, typed pages long. (Note that this means you are expected to produce a total of 25-30 pages of writing over the term.) Entries should be written in your highest-quality conventional academic prose, but adhere to the unconventional format dictated below. Each entry, in other words, should be composed of these five substantive paragraphs:

1. a restatement of the argument and methodology of the weekly reading, in your own words
2. three interesting, gee-whiz things you learned, gathered into a single paragraph governed by a topic sentence relating them to the book's central themes
3. consideration of what this reading adds to the stock of questions, problems, interpretations, and overall knowledge of world history relative to previous works we've read
4. a critique of the reading's shortcomings in interpretation and methodology
5. a list of other regions or societies, past or present, to which this reading's methods or questions could be fruitfully applied and what hypotheses could be tested in the process

I will spot-check the journals every week but only collect them twice: once, during week 4, to assess your progress, provide a preliminary grade, and indicate areas for improvement; and once, at the very last class, for final grading. Special instructions will be given for week 6.

Schedule

I. ANCIENT TECHNOLOGIES AND ENVIRONMENTS

1. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 9-52; screen episode one of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* documentary
2. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 83-214, 239-64
3. Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, vii-237

II. PRE-MODERN AND NON-WESTERN MANIPULATIONS OF NATURE

4. Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, ix-33, 68-106, 193-227
5. Mann, *1491*, 273-378

6. Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, 115-64; [Richard Hoffmann, "Economic Development and Aquatic Ecosystems in Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review* 101 no. 3 \(Jun. 1996\): 631-69](#); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, 3-28 (all on e-reserve)

III. GLOBAL INTEGRATION AND ITS BIO-/ECOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

7. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, 1-210, 277-310

8. Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* (entire)

IV. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: WHAT'S UNPRECEDENTED?

9. J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century*, xxi-266

10. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 267-362 and Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 403-25