History 3433, America in Depression and War
Fall, 2012
Instructor: M. Dennis
BAC Room #407
Office hours: Monday, 5:30-6:30, Wednesday, Friday, 4:00-6:00

No period in the American past has presented such a direct challenge to the nation's founding myths as the Great Depression. In the midst of the economic crisis of the Depression, a wide range of Americans began to question the success myth inherited from the Gilded Age. Out of this questioning, Americans produced a set of institutions and values that curbed the crisis and redefined American society in the postwar era. The political and cultural values generated by this "New Deal" era would profoundly influence American society, but so too would the reaction against it. In some sense, then, the debates of the 1930s produced the social and political divisions that define American society today.

This course is not only a study of politics and economic change; it is also an examination of the cultural ruptures and opportunities that developed in a period of crisis. While we will study New Deal policy and working-class movements of social protest, we will also examine gangster films, backstage musicals, big band music, western novels, and other defining expressions of popular culture. What we will discover is a nation trying to come to grips with the uncertainties of industrial capitalism, urban modernization, the demands of world power, and the "perils of prosperity," as one historian described it. Naturally, then, the course will lead into a consideration of America at war. While we will spend some time on the experience of American combat in Europe and the Asian theater, the preponderance of our efforts will be expended on examining the social consequences of mobilization and American militarization. What did the war mean for those who fought it? What impact did it have on African Americans, working-class women, and industrial laborers? How did it influence American political economy in the postwar era? What were the implications for American culture and diplomacy in the postwar world? How did it change American visions of freedom, equality, and the dream of upward mobility? What we will find is that the early postwar years were a critical period in the struggle to institutionalize the gains of the New Deal and expand its reach in American society.

There are a few critical ingredients to success in this course. The first is **class attendance and participation**—without it, you will lose focus, fall behind, and produce disappointing results. Quite simply, should you choose to miss more than **three** classes and fail to participate in group activities in class, expect disappointing results. If there are extenuating circumstances that prevent you from being in class, then let me know. The second is the willingness to *work on the craft of writing and research*. Understand that you are in training to become a 'practicing humanist', if you will. That's someone who is capable of engaging in thoughtful reflection about the world in which they live. That world has been indelibly shaped by history, literature, philosophy, and art. As a practicing humanist, you will understand the relationship between the intellectual heritage of the humanities and contemporary society. That will benefit you in innumerable ways once you graduate, not least of which is to make you a better citizen. To achieve that objective you must develop your skills of critical analysis and empirical research. Third, you must enter into the *spirit of the course*. This means adopting an attitude of commitment but also a willingness to explore ideas, movements, organizations, and cultural forms that may seem alien, strange, or absurd. The past is indeed a foreign country, but it's populated by people who share a common humanity with us. Our objective is to understand those people on their terms, in *the context in which they lived*, but also to understand that they confronted questions similar to the ones we confront today. We need to explore how the decisions they made affect American society today, but also ask the question: how does it relate to us? What do

these steel workers and housewives and labor activists and paratroopers and migrant workers have to say to us today?

Course requirements

First, a few class policies. Should extenuating circumstances prevent you from submitting an assignment on time, please secure a legitimate medical note prior to the due date. Late submissions will be assessed at 2% a day, including weekends. If you miss class, it is incumbent upon you to secure notes from another student. If you need to miss class for a legitimate reason, it's recommended that you contact the professor and let him know. I will keep (general) track of your attendance in class. You are also responsible for any announcements made in class as well as any information communicated via the blackboard or through extemporaneous discussions. In other words, if you rely only on the posted Powerpoint slides, you are inviting academic peril. Finally, let me recapitulate this point: if your attendance and participation are sporadic—or chronically negligent—expect disappointing results, not only in the class participation category, but in the course.

**Midterm test:** 20%, in class, October 15th.
**Class participation**: 15%. This includes attendance, presentations, brief reading responses, as well as day-to-day class contributions *based on the readings and lectures*. You are welcome to inquire about your progress in this area at any time.
**Essay**: 25%. This assignment gives you two options: 1, design an essay that utilizes McElvaine's *Down and Out in the Great Depression*, Brinkley's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, **and** "Investigating U.S. History," http://investigatinghistory.ashp.cuny.edu/m10.html to write an analysis the labor uprising of the 1930s. If you choose this option, you are expected to utilize at *least eight primary sources* from the site, five of which must be written documents. You are also expected to address the introductory secondary sources (Bernstein, Meister, and Fletcher.) Should you choose this option, you need not conduct any additional research; 2**,** incorporate McElvaine's and Brinkley's book into an analysis of some aspect of America during the Great Depression and the New Deal years. You will have to find effective ways to integrate these sources into your analysis, which should also include an **additional five secondary** sources**,** two of which must be books, **as well as two primary sources**. You are welcome to include David Kennedy's "What the New Deal Did" as one of those sources. Please note: if you choose this option, you need not focus on Roosevelt in your essay. For example, you might decide to address the political or cultural significance of the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Theater Project, or the Tennessee Valley Authority. Any of these would allow you to include Brinkley's and McElvaine's book, but your perspective might emphasize social history over public policy, the impact of popular protest on New Deal policy, or the economic debates that swirled about Washington at the time. Whatever focus you choose, strive to establish a clear thesis, demonstrate historical awareness, and provide sufficient documentation.
Due November 12thin class. This essay should be 10-12 pages.
**Reading commentary** on The Girl, 10%. Due in class, November 5th. This should 4-5 double-spaced pages.
**Final exam**: 30%.

A few caveats: computers, cell phones, tablets, and other electronic devices that interfere with the attention of your colleagues and the patience of your professor should be shut off during flight. Failure to do so will more than likely have an impact on your class participation grade. Late assignments are assessed at 2% a day, including weekends. The professor reserves the right to make adjustments to the reading schedule; should this be necessary, the modifications will almost always be in your favor. Finally, the professor will

consider rewrites on assignments—but only on a case-by-case basis, and only after you have visited him during office hours to make your case.

**Required texts**:

Robert McElvaine, Down and Out in the Great Depression
Dana Frank, Detroit Woolworth's Strike of 1937**:** Counter-Strike: Women Strikers Occupy Chain Store, Win Big
Alan Brinkley, Franklin D. Roosevelt
Meridel Le Sueur, The Girl

Class schedule and readings

Week of September 5th: Introduction, distribution of syllabi, brief discussion of America in the 1920s.

Week of September 10: From the Jazz Age to the Era of Collapse—understanding the cultural and economic realities of America in the less-than Roaring Twenties. Lynn Dumenil, "The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s," *OAH Magazine of History* 21 (2007): 22-26; Lisa McGirr, "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti: A Global History," *Journal of American History* 93 (Mar2007): 1085-1115.

Week of September 17th: The origins of the collapse and the impact on American society--a consideration of underlying economic weaknesses and the response of the Hoover administration; Hollywood and its gangsters. Readings: Le Sueur, The Girl.

Week of September 24th: The social consequences of economic collapse, gangster films and the interpretation of the Great Depression. Readings: Down and Out in the Great Depression, pgs. ix-65, including introduction (Tuesday); 69-142 (Thursday.)

Week of October 1st: The Coming of the New Deal—experiments, failures, and roads not taken; the appeal of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, photographic journalism and the social realist impulse of the Depression years. Readings: Down and Out in the Great Depression, 155-182, 215-229; Alan Brinkley, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ix-45.

Week of October 8th: The Working-Class Rebellion of the 1930s. The rise of the Unemployed Councils, the Communist Party, and the labor uprising of the 1930s. Exercise on the longshoremen's strike of 1934, http://investigatinghistory.ashp.cuny.edu/m10.html; Dana Frank, "Counter-Strike: Women Strikers Occupy Chain Store, Win Big" (Wednesday.)

Week of October 15th: The Second New Deal, The Roosevelt Recession, the sit-down strike wave and the crescent of industrial unionism. Readings: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 46-62; Daniel Nelson, "'Give Us Roosevelt': Workers and the New Deal Coalition," *History Today* 40 (January 1990): 40-48 (Wednesday.)

Week of October 22th: Demagogues, right-wing activists, and resistance to the New Deal. Readings: Down and Out in the Great Depression, 145-54; 175-82; David Kennedy, "What the New Deal Did," *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (Summer2009):251-268.

Week of October 29st: The Spanish Civil War, fascism on the rise, and the American response. Readings: Peter Carroll, The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, preface, chapters 1-4.

Week of November 5th: From isolation to intervention; the economics and politics of wartime mobilization. Readings: Brinkley, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 63-99; Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1296-1318.

Week of November 12th: Remembrance Day (Monday); Wednesday: Hollywood anti-fascism, women, the experience of combat, the Great Crusade. Readings: John Bodnar, "Saving Private Ryan and Postwar Memory," American Historical Review 106 (Jun2001): 805-817.

Week of November 19st: The experience of war on the homefront, African Americans and the crusade for democracy, labor, corporate America, and the war. Readings: Andrew Kersten, "African Americans and World War II," *OAH Magazine of History* (Spring 2002), pp.13-17.

Week of November 26th: The dislocations of the postwar period: hopes for economic democracy, film noir and the working class, preparations for war in the atomic age.