

Vanderbilt University  
Department of Economics  
Economics 8400  
*Introduction to Economic History*  
Spring 2021

*Revised March 11, 2021*

Time: W 8:10–10:50am Central Time  
Place: Zoom  
Instructor: Ariell Zimran, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Economics  
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Office Hours: By appointment

**Course Description** This course studies the causes and the short- and long-term consequences of the transition from stagnation to modern economic growth in the long run. The bulk of the course centers on describing the beginnings of modern economic growth in what is sometimes called the “long nineteenth century,” and identifying the factors responsible for it, and thus for British, and then European and American, leadership of modern economic growth. We then turn to some of the disruptions arising from the transition to modern economic growth, such as adverse impacts on health and living standards, migration, and inequality. Finally, we study the Great Depression. The course ultimately aims to give students an appreciation for the long-run origins of the modern economy and of modern economic problems. This course prepares students for further study towards a dissertation in Economic History (e.g., ECON 9440 and ECON 9450); with a grade of B- or better, it satisfies the Economic History requirement for the PhD in Economics.

**Prerequisites** ECON 8100 and ECON 8200. The course also assumes familiarity with econometrics at the advanced undergraduate level and a basic familiarity with American and European history.

**Course Structure** Each weekly meeting will be treated as two distinct classes. In general, we will spend two such classes on each topic, each a week apart. During the first, I will give a lecture covering background information and the key debates and results in the literature, with a focus on a few important papers. During the second, which will occur the following week, we will focus on two specific papers in that literature. Each paper will be presented by one student, who will then lead our detailed discussion of it, which will focus, in part, on its motivation, contribution, and methodology. The exceptions to this structure are as follows: “Econometrics” will be entirely lecture-based and the final class (i.e., the second half of our last meeting) will be devoted to presentations of students’ research projects.

All class meetings will be held synchronously on Zoom. Outside of special circumstances, students are expected to attend and participate synchronously in all class meetings with video on. If this will be a problem for you (e.g., if you have long-term technological or connectivity issues) please speak to me as soon as possible. Class sessions will not be recorded.

**Seminar Attendance** Students considering writing a dissertation in empirical microeconomics should attend VEAM-WIPT talks on Fridays at 9:00am (contact Professor Carpenter to get on the mailing list). Students considering writing a dissertation in economic history should attend the Economic History Tea on Thursdays at 4:00pm (contact me to get on the mailing list). All students are encouraged to attend the Economic History seminars. These are currently scheduled for 4:00pm on March 30, April 13, and April 27 (all Tuesdays). Additional seminars may be scheduled and, if so, will be announced. Information on these seminars should be distributed to the whole department, but you can always contact me for information.

**Note** Everything on this syllabus is subject to change, particularly this year as I am overhauling the course. For this reason, be sure to check with me if you are planning to read more than a week ahead, to prepare more than a week in advance for a presentation, or to work on a referee report before I have announced

in class that the paper is finalized. If you have any questions, concerns, or suggestions, please feel free to discuss them with me. Please also inform me if the schedule of the course conflicts with important dates in the other first year courses, as it may be possible to move some deadlines around.

We are dealing with very unusual and unprecedented circumstances. If you are having trouble, I will not judge you or think less of you. I hope you will extend the same grace to me. If you need extra help, to miss class, or more time with something, please ask and I'll do my best to work with you. You do not need to give me any personal information about your physical or mental health, or anything else. That said, you are always welcome to talk to me about anything that is going on, though be aware that I am subject to some mandatory reporting requirements. I will do what I can to help.

**Course Materials** The course focuses almost entirely on journal articles or unpublished papers, all of which are available online. For published papers, be sure to look at the published version. For unpublished papers, in the NBER Working Papers or CEPR Discussion Papers Series, use that version. For all other unpublished papers, I will provide the version of record for the course (usually the version posted on the author's website). Some of the readings will be book chapters, which will be made available on Brightspace. Let me know if you have trouble finding anything. During each class, I will produce a virtual "blackboard" and will post this online after class; note that this will not be an exhaustive set of notes, so you will still need to have your own.

Much background information for the United States comes from the following textbook.

Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell (1994). *A New Economic View of American History from Colonial Times to 1940*. 2nd ed. New York: W W Norton & Co.

This book is not required, but it is helpful to read in order to get an understanding of the background of many of the topics that we discuss in American Economic History. If you think that you might ever teach a course in American Economic History, you should read the whole thing (as I wish I had done when I was in your position).

We will also have a brief "crash course" in econometrics at the beginning of the course. There is no single reference that this will be based on. Students interested in acquiring a handbook in applied econometrics should consider purchasing the following textbook.

Joshua D. Angrist and Jörn-Steffen Pischke (2009). *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist's Companion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

## Evaluation

- *Class Participation* (20%). As we will spend half of the course discussing papers, it is crucial that all students come to class having thoroughly read the papers to be discussed (your classmates will be leading the discussion—be prepared to support them!). Students should also look over the other papers listed on the reading list in advance of lectures, and are expected to participate actively in these lectures.
- *Class Presentations* (20%). Each student will present in class six papers from the reading list; we will make an initial assignment of papers on the first day of class, but Pareto-improving trades made afterwards are welcome (just let me know at least a week in advance). Presentations should be about 15 minutes in length and should take the form of a conference presentation. The presenter will then lead the class's discussion of the paper. I will circulate additional guidelines for the presentations and discussions separately.
- *Referee Reports* (20%). Each student will complete two referee reports, due **Wednesday, March 3** and **Wednesday, March 31**. I will circulate guidelines for and examples of referee reports separately, as well as the papers to be reviewed.

- *Research Project* (20%). You will submit a brief proposal on **Wednesday, March 17** for my feedback. Projects will be presented (20 minutes, including about 5 minutes for questions) during the last class on **Wednesday, April 28**, and the final write-up should be submitted **with the final examination**. Develop a research question and prospectus stating and motivating the question, situating it in the existing literature, developing an identification strategy, and exploring data that can be brought to bear on the question. In some cases where the data are already available and the empirical strategy is not too time intensive, it may be possible to submit a more advanced write-up, or even a preliminary working paper.
- *Final Examination* (20%). There will be a take-home final examination. Because our course meets at a non-standard time, it does not have a pre-determined examination date; we will discuss a mutually convenient date for the final examination on the first day of class. You will be permitted to consult any source you wish (including the papers that are asked about) in the course of the exam, but are not permitted to consult any other person. More details of the structure of the exam will be announced later.

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**Schedule of Meetings and Topics** Readings listed below are those that form the basis for the lecture on each topic, or are those that will be presented by students and discussed in class. The latter are italicized. You are expected to have skimmed the papers in roman text (and to have attended the lecture reviewing them, so that you know the research question, position in the literature, setting, data, empirical approach, main results, etc.), and should read them in detail if you have a particular interest in the literature. You are expected to be deeply familiar with the papers in italics, whether you are presenting them or not.

Dates	Topic	Readings	Notable Events
Jan. 27	Course Overview	McCloskey (1976) Abramitzky (2015) Margo (2018)	
Jan. 27–Feb. 3	Econometrics	Angrist and Pischke (2009) Goodman-Bacon (2020) Goldsmith-Pinkham et al. (2019)	
Feb. 3–10	Persistence	Nunn (2009) Dell (2010) Dell and Olken (2020) Libecap and Lueck (2011) Kelly (2019) Bisin and Moro (2020) <i>Alesina et al. (2013)</i> <i>Acemoglu et al. (2011b)</i>	
Feb. 10–17	The Malthusian Economy and the Rise of Europe	Clark (2007, ch. 2) Ashraf and Galor (2011) Acemoglu et al. (2005) Voigtländer and Voth (2013) Dittmar (2011) Cantoni and Yuchtman (2014) <i>Cantoni et al. (2018)</i> <i>Dittmar and Seabold (2019)</i>	

Feb. 17–24	Institutions	Dittmar and Meisenzahl (2020) North and Weingast (1989) Acemoglu et al. (2001) Acemoglu et al. (2011a) Shiue and Keller (2007) Hornbeck (2010) <i>Lecce et al. (2019)</i> <i>Acemoglu et al. (2020)</i>	
Feb. 24–Mar. 3	The Industrial Revolution	Allen (2009, chs. 2, 6) Mokyr (2009, chs. 3, 5, 6) Squicciarini and Voigtländer (2015) Kelly et al. (2020) Hanlon (2015) <i>Mokyr et al. (2020)</i> <i>Hornung (2014)</i>	RR 1 Due 3/3
Mar. 3–Mar. 10	Transportation	Hornung (2015) Fogel (1962) Atack et al. (2010) Donaldson and Hornbeck (2016) Donaldson (2018) Zimran (2020b) <i>Hornbeck and Rotemberg (2019)</i> <i>Smith (2020)</i>	
Mar. 10–17	Human Capital and the Demographic Transition	Guinnane (2011) Galor (2011, ch. 2) Galor and Moav (2006) Becker et al. (2010) Becker et al. (2011) Ager et al. (2018) Beach and Hanlon (2019) <i>Squicciarini (2020)</i> <i>Bailey (2010)</i>	Prop. Due 3/17
Mar. 17–24	Education	Becker and Woessmann (2009) Goldin and Katz (1999) Goldin and Katz (2008, chs. 1, 6) Aaronson and Mazumder (2011) Baker et al. (2020) <i>Kose et al. (2020)</i> <i>Bleemer and Quincy (2020)</i>	
Mar. 24–31	Health & Living Standards	Voth (2003) Zimran (2019) Alsan and Goldin (2019) Beach et al. (2016) Beach and Hanlon (2018) Clay et al. (2018) Bleakley (2007) <i>Goodman-Bacon (2018)</i> <i>Acemoglu and Johnson (2007)</i>	RR 2 Due 3/31

Mar. 31–Apr. 7	Immigration	Abramitzky and Boustan (2017) Spitzer and Zimran (2019) Spitzer and Zimran (2018) Abramitzky et al. (2012) Collins and Zimran (2020) Karadja and Prawitz (2019) Tabellini (2020) Price et al. (2020) <i>Fernández-Sánchez (2020)</i> <i>Abramitzky et al. (2019)</i>
Apr. 7–14	Internal Migration	Zimran (2020a) Ward (2020b) Collins (1997) Collins and Wanamaker (2014) Boustan (2010) Hornbeck and Naidu (2014) <i>Stuart and Taylor (2018)</i> <i>Pérez (2018)</i>
Apr. 14–21	Inequality and Mobility	Piketty and Saez (2003) Goldin and Margo (1992) Goldin and Katz (2007) Long and Ferrie (2013) Pérez (2019) Collins and Wanamaker (2017) Ager et al. (2019) <i>Bleakley and Ferrie (2016)</i> <i>Ward (2020a)</i>
Apr. 21–28	The Great Depression	Bernanke (1995) Calomiris and Mason (2003) Richardson and Troost (2009) Eichengreen (1992, ch. 1) Fishback et al. (2005) Ziebarth (2020) <i>Quincy (2019)</i> <i>Hausman (2016)</i>
Apr. 28	Project Presentations	
TBD	Final Examination	Project Due

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## References

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