WOMEN’S WORK: GENDER AND CAPITALISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Professor Rachel Knecht | HiST161a
Course Meeting: Mondays & Wednesdays, 5-6:20pm in Shiffman 201
Office Hours: Wednesdays 11am-1pm in Olin-Sang 217

COURSE OVERVIEW

What makes an activity “work”? How does the free market decide what goods and services should cost? What is the relationship between the economy and the family? What services should the state provide, and for what should we depend on the market? These questions live at the heart of economic history, and shape the shifting relationships between economy, politics, and society. They are also deeply gendered. Although the “history of capitalism” has long been a primarily male story, debates over domestic labor, women workers, the family, and welfare have all profoundly shaped the realities of economic life throughout United States history – not just for women, but for all Americans.

The course will begin in eighteenth century colonial America and end in the present day. It covers domestic and household work, enslaved women's reproductive labor, wage labor and protective legislation, the vision of family in New Deal legislation, the conception of a right to work, and the feminization of labor in the modern service economy.

Learning Goals: By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze the role of women and gender in shaping or changing economic ideas, policies, institutions, and lived experiences in American history;
- Discuss the way that intersections between gender and race, socioeconomic class, and sexuality have also been borne out in economic changes; and
- Formulate original arguments about the historical relationship of gender to capitalism through discussion, research, and analytical writing.
**Course Hours:** For this course, students seeking to maximize their learning should expect to spend 180 hours: 35 hours in class (13 weeks, 160 minutes); 65 hours reading (5-6 hours each week); 10 hours writing their source analysis; and 70 hours on their research paper, which includes researching and writing their proposal and bibliography; preparing their class presentation; and writing and revising the final draft. Both the total time and this distribution will certainly vary by student; they will not be monitored by myself or Brandeis.

---

**COURSE POLICIES**

**REQUIRED READING MATERIALS:**

The following books will be available at the bookstore and either on hold at the Brandeis Library or available online. They can also be purchased at the retailer of your choice.

**Required Books:**

- Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1957)

A required reading packet containing all additional readings for the course is also available for purchase in Olin-Sang 215. It is imperative that you stay up to date on the reading assignments, and that you remember to bring all reading materials to class meetings.

**GRADED ASSIGNMENTS:**

This course requires two major assignments: (1) a 4-6 page analysis of a single source, and (2) a 12-15 page research paper on a topic of your choosing, including some preliminary assignments intended to support your research. Grades will be distributed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Grade Portion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source Analysis</td>
<td>March 4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
<td>March 27</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Bibliography</td>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Presentation</td>
<td>April 27 &amp; May 1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source Analysis:** Students will choose one day’s collection of readings and write an essay of 4-6 pages (about 1500 words). The paper should present an original insight about the texts and analyze both primary and secondary documents together. The assignment is designed as a space to practice the skills needed for the longer, final research paper.

**Research Paper:** Based on the themes and issues discussed in class, students will write a research paper of 12-15 pages (about 3,500-4,500 words). We will talk more about how to approach this assignment over the course of the semester, but the best road to an original
and interesting paper is to begin with a compelling question—one without an obvious answer. I encourage you to come speak with me about your ideas for this paper. Besides the final product, the research paper assignment also contains three scaffolded assignments that will directly relate to the particular project that students choose:

**Proposal:** A research proposal of no more than 500 words is due first. The purpose of the proposal is to lay out the intended topic of your research paper, as well as, the main historical question you intend to answer through your research. Then, explain what sources and methods you will use to answer it. The proposal should also include some basic historiographical information to background the project.

**Bibliography:** Your bibliography should be a two-page annotated list of the secondary sources and primary texts, collections, images, etc. that you will be using for your research. This will ensure that you are on track to complete your research in a timely fashion, and it will give me an opportunity to suggest further reading.

**Presentation:** During our last week of class, each student will give a five-minute talk to the rest of the class about their research question, sources, methods, and experiences with the project, then take a few additional minutes of questions from the class. These presentations are necessarily of works in progress; therefore, they should include both what work students have done so far, as well as what more they hope to do.

**Class Participation:** Participation will be a key component of the course. Keep in mind that attendance in class is mental as well as physical. I ask that you do all the assigned readings and come to class prepared to listen and respond to your peers. If you agree with something stated, build off it with your own analysis. If you disagree, pose a constructive challenge. If you are shy or otherwise have trouble speaking up in groups, please come talk to me and we will find a way for you to participate fully, so you can get the most out of the class.

### ADDITIONAL CLASS POLICIES

- To pass the course, students must consistently come prepared for discussion and turn in every assignment. Three absences will be excused; more than that will result in a half letter grade being docked from the final grade.

- If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me in my office right away so that we can set up the appropriate accommodations.

- Barring special accommodation, **students will keep laptops closed and phones off during class meetings.** The temptation to surf the web is irrepressible, and distracts not only you, but everyone sitting around you. Additionally, please do not record lectures or discussions without first getting permission from me.

- You are expected to be honest in all your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University [Rights and Responsibilities](#) for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Allegations of alleged dishonesty can include a failing grade for the course and/or suspension from the university. Course assignments will include citation guidelines, but you may also consult me or the [LTS Library Guides](#).

- Course communication will occur in class and via email. Should there be any changes to the schedule (such as in the case of school cancellation), I will send out a revised
syllabus via email. The syllabus and assignments will be handed out in class as well as posted on the LATTE course website. Students are always welcome to come talk to me during my office hours; no appointment is necessary.

- **Late assignments** will be docked half a grade and then lose an additional half grade every twenty-four hours. I am happy to provide an extension on any assignment to students who ask for one more than forty-eight hours in advance of the deadline. Once an extension is granted, the late penalty will apply to the new deadline.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

**January 16: “Gendering” “Capitalism”**

**January 22: Women’s Labor in the Atlantic World**

**January 23: Race, Gender, & Power**

**January 28: The Colonial Household**

**January 30: The Moral Economy**

**February 4: The American Revolution**

**February 6: The Transition to Capitalism**

**February 11: In-Work**

February 13: Out-Work

February 25: Slavery’s Capitalism

February 27: The Meaning of Freedom

March 4: The New American Economy
SOURCE ANALYSIS DUE IN CLASS

March 6: Domestic Work

March 11: Organizing Women’s Labor
Reading: Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, pp. 142-179; “Building a Cooperative,” “Union Organizing,” “Self-Help or Protest?” “The Trade Union Women’s Perspective” and “Working Women for Suffrage” in Baxandall/Gordon.

March 13: Protective Legislation
Reading: Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, pp. 180-214; “The Shirtwaist Uprising,” “Life is Cheap, Property is Sacred” and “Unions Oppose the ERA” in Baxandall/Gordon; selections from “The Brandeis Brief” in support of Muller v. Oregon (1908) [RP].

March 18: Depression Life
March 20: Making a New Deal

March 25: War Work

MARCH 27: NO CLASS, RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE

April 1: The Age of Affluence

April 3: Postwar Precarity
Reading: Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun (1957), all; “Working Mothers and Delinquency,” and “A Puerto Rican Fights for a Garment Job” in Baxandall/Gordon.

April 8: The Right to Work

April 10: The Right Not to Work

April 15: Women’s Work

BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE IN CLASS

April 17: Casual Labor
Reading: Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed (2001), all.

April 29 & May 1: Research Presentations

FINAL PAPER DUE MAY 15