HISTORY 2B: STRATEGIES FOR YOUR LONG PAPER

Official Prompt: “Write an analysis, not a summary, of some aspect of knowledge making and its history,” minimum six pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, etc. Below we explain what this cryptic phrase really means.

Topic: First, decide on a topic. It’s pretty open-ended, so aim for something you’re interested in and maybe already familiar with – an activity, an academic discipline, an institution, a group of some sort. It could be related to something you’ve read about in this course or something mentioned in lecture or section that piqued your interest.

The syllabus explains: “Your paper should be concerned with some specific aspect of the making, teaching, circulation, application, and consumption of social knowledge, worldwide, over the last four centuries. You might want to focus on some feature of the history of social thought, social theories, social sciences, and/or social engineering. Other kinds of social knowledge crafting you might consider include: the history of administration, arts, architectures, cooking, entertainments, games, governments, humanities, law, music, physical sciences, religions; social sciences, sports, theater, etc.”

Frame your topic: You should try and narrow your scope as much as possible; after all, you only have only six pages. Some questions to think about include:

- How does knowledge – techniques, identities, Truth, etc. – in your chosen topic get made, manipulated, passed on, circulated, etc.?
- Who does the making, manipulating? Who doesn’t? What is their motivation?
- Why is this knowledge considered important/interesting?
- Can a more general claim about social knowledge and social power be made from the topic that you have presented and examined?

Establish for yourself a concise, argumentative thesis statement that is provable both within the allotted space and with the resources available to you.

The key word here is argument. (Think: Something that someone could disagree with.) The paper topics are not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, and there are no wrong answers. Instead the topics present issues for you to explore and form informed, justifiable opinions about. In this paper, you are not just expected to tell us what is in the text – you’re expected to analyze the material. This means generating opinions, staking claims, and drawing conclusions. With every claim you make, ask yourself: How can I support this with evidence from the text? The more specific you are, the better your argument will be.

Decisions, decisions, decisions: You can now take one of two different approaches:

1. Historiography: An analysis of secondary literature on your topic (works by social scientists—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.). In short, you do a comprehensive literature search on your narrowed topic, and try to uncover the major debates and disagreements within the field, and chronicle how these debates have evolved over time. When doing this, you also insert your own analysis/argument—which side do you take in these debates and why. What are the benefits of one approach over another? This is called a historiography.

2. Your own study: An analysis of the primary literature, communication, articles, speeches, etc., generated by individual and group players from within your topic. You ask a question, form a hypothesis, and try to support it.
If you choose the latter you should probably draw from some discussion of secondary literature as well in order to provide your analysis with some structure. Also if you choose the latter approach you need to get started early tracking down your materials.

Please, please, please come to me with any questions. I am happy to look at theses and outlines as well as drafts—but not via email. Shoot, I’m happy for you to just stop by office hours to talk with me about ideas you have. I am that starved for human contact… woe is me…

I realize that this sheet is kind of free-flowing and still pretty vague on details. This is an intentional move – I want this to remain an open-ended exercise.

**Sometimes it is useful to see what is _not_ good writing practice, if only to better see what _is_ good writing practice:**

(And no, my dear friends, I do **not** want a clear, plastic, professional-looking binder…)