HST 101-14

Big History: Fall Semester 2010

- **Instructor:** Dr. Craig Benjamin

- **Office Phone (voice-mail):** 331-3469

- **E-mail:** benjamic@gvsu.edu

- **Office and Hours:** HON 130. MWF 9.00-9.45 am; 2.00-3.00 pm

- **Time and Place:** MWF 1.00-1.50 pm; MAK D-1.....


- **Course Description and Objectives**

  This course offers a consideration of the meaning of a university education, and an introduction to a wide range of disciplines which flourish within the academy. The course is structured according to the pedagogical approach of ‘big history’. Traditional history, as with most academic disciplines, looks in detail at particular subjects, events, processes, themes, and other phenomena. Whilst focusing on the minutiae of the physical and metaphysical allows us to glimpse the ideas, actions, discoveries, and hopes that have given shape to our world, this offers only a partial illumination of the past and present. A more inclusive understanding requires broadening and deepening the perspective of our inquiry. This means not only examining the relationships between a wide range of elements – individuals, cultural change, technological innovation, political structures, and the environment for example – but also considering this relationship over larger geographical and time scales. Big historians believe that the reward for expanding our spatial and temporal perspective is a much better understanding of where we have been, and where we are going as a species.

  Big history is thus deliberately and intentionally interdisciplinary. No one could argue that disciplinary specialization has not been of immense benefit to our species. The fragmentation of modern knowledge into myriad sub-specializations has allowed for extraordinary discoveries in a vast array of theoretical and practical matters by thinkers who have been able to immerse themselves completely in the minutiae of their subject. But what has been lost in this intense drive into the ‘sub-atomic’ world is the ability to join these various parcels of tiny knowledge into a coherent whole, to show the connections between them. Big history has been at the forefront of efforts to offer a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to the past, present, and future since it first emerged as a genre in the late 1980’s.

  This course looks at the past on the largest possible time scale: it begins with the origins of the universe, and goes on to consider the modern scientific accounts of the origins of stars and planets, of life on earth, the emergence of human beings, and the
various types of human societies that have existed up to the present day. Ultimately
the course encourages students and instructors to consider our own particular place
and time in the globalized world, and to think of how we might contribute to the
future of that world. One of the primary objectives of the course is that, by the end,
students will be able to provide thoughtful responses to the following questions:

- How and when does modern science suggest the universe was created?
- How and when were our sun and solar system created?
- How and when was the earth created?
- What forces created and shaped the history of the earth’s lands, seas and
  atmosphere?
- How and when did life first appear on earth, according to modern science?
- How did life assume the variety of forms we see today?
- How and when did modern humans evolve?
- How did the earliest human communities live?
- When does human history begin, and why?
- How and when did agriculture first appear?
- How and when did the first cities and states evolve?
- How did agrarian civilizations appear and evolve over 4,000 years of
  history?
- What are the origins of modern industrial society?
- Why did the ‘modern revolution’ take a European form?
- How did the 20th century differ from all previous periods in human history?
- Does a study of history on this scale help us predict the future?

**Assessment**

There are five assessment components for the course:

1. **Quizzes:** Several multiple-choice, fact-based quizzes on course content.
   These will be completed in class on four Fridays. Worth 10% of total
   assessment.

2. **Research Essay One:** A 1000-word research paper on topics covered in the
   first five weeks of the course. Due Friday October 8th. Worth 20% of total grade.
   - Use 1.5 spacing; 12 point font
   - Use at least four different sources in your research
   - Include a Bibliography
   - Refer to document ‘Writing Essays in History’ on Blackboard

**Questions for 1st Essay: CHOOSE ONE ONLY**

1. How does modern science explain the origins of the universe, and what are
   the key pieces of evidence that can be used to support this account? Are there
   any problems with the big bang theory, and how are these being addressed by
   cosmologists and physicists?

2. How does modern science explain the birth, life and death of stars, and what
   are the key pieces of evidence used to support this account? Are there any
   problems with the current theories, and how are these being addressed by
   astronomers?

3. How does modern science explain the origins and shaping of the Earth, and
   what are the key pieces of evidence that can be used to support this account?
Are there problems with the solar nebular theory, or with the plate tectonics paradigm, and how are these being addressed by earth scientists?

4. How does modern science explain the origins of life on earth, and what evidence can be used to support this account? Are there any problems with the evolutionary theory or the chemo-synthetic model of the origins of life, and how are these being addressed by life scientists?

5. Give a brief account of hominid evolution, outlining the key species and their attributes. When, in your opinion, do we first start seeing distinctive ‘human’ traits in hominids?

6. What does it mean to be human? When does human history begin, and why? There is no right or wrong answer to this question. Simply make a coherent, evidence-based argument that human history begins anywhere along a continuum from the big bang to yesterday.

3. Essay Two: A 1200-word research paper on topics covered in weeks six to eleven of the course. Essay due Friday November 19th. Worth 25% of total assessment.

• Use 1.5 spacing; 12 point font
• Use at least five different sources in your research
• Include a Bibliography
• Refer to document ‘Writing Essays in History’ on Blackboard

Questions for 2nd Essay: CHOOSE ONE ONLY

1. How might the origins of agriculture be explained? Why would some human communities abandon successful hunter gathering for much riskier farming? Consider recent archaeological and genetic evidence in your response

2. How do historians and archaeologists distinguish early agrarian era societies from agrarian civilizations? How do we explain the transition from village-based, small-scale farming to urban-based, complex agrarian civilizations? In your answer, consider recent anthropological and psychological theories concerning the origins and evolution of power in early human communities

3. Why were the first two Silk Roads Eras (c.100 BCE – c. 250 CE; and C. 600-900 CE) so important to human history? Were the most significant exchanges material or non-material?

4. What explanations have been offered for the Industrial Revolution happening in Europe rather than elsewhere? How convincing do you find these explanations?

5. Is environmental degradation exclusively a 20th and 21st century phenomenon? In your answer assess the environmental impact of at least three pre-twentieth century societies

6. Was the 20th century ‘something new under the sun’? That is, was it something fundamentally different to all previous centuries in human history? If so, why?

4. Group discussion participation and leadership

Worth 20% of total assessment

You are expected to not only turn up at group discussion sessions, but to have completed all readings and be prepared to participate in discussion on each weekly
Students will also lead (in teams of 4) one of the group discussion sessions

- Remember, 20% of course mark is earned for participation in group discussion sessions, and for leading one session.
- There will be a total of 11 discussion sessions
- Discussion topics will be found below in the weekly timetable
- You will need to volunteer to co-lead a particular topic as soon as possible.

First in, first choice.

- Everyone (not just those leading the session for that week) will be expected to have completed all readings before the discussion session
- All students are expected to be able to describe the key ideas in the readings; respond to the questions posed; listen respectfully to the ideas of others; think of your own questions
- Leading a session requires interaction with course materials and with other people – you need to consider both. The following ideas might be helpful:

Leading a Discussion Session

- Don’t just read out a paper – present your information in smaller chunks and schedule questions and activities in between
- Prepare the questions you want to ask or the activities you want people to do before class – make it clear what you want your classmates to do
- Encourage participation – try and get everyone involved (use polling, direct questions etc)
- Try to be flexible – sometimes it’s better to let the discussion flow, even if it takes you away from your schedule. But try and keep discussions on the subject
- Presenting different or conflicting views – sometimes discussion gets a good kick along if you play devil’s advocate, or present an opposing view to the group
- Request responses, then wait for them – don’t pose a question and then answer it yourself; wait for someone to answer. Rephrase if necessary
- Be accepting of listeners and the shy – some people learn best by listening to discussions, while others might be shy and find it difficult to speak up. Try not to put people on the spot, or embarrass them

5. Final Exam: Five short (paragraph or two) answers; one longer essay - 1 hour 50 mins. Held TBA Worth 30% of total assessment

Grading Guide

- A Grade - 93-100%: Exceptional quality of analysis, wide research, logical argument and organization, originality, and a complete mastery of the materials covered in lectures, reading and class discussion
- A- Grade - 90-92%: Very strong work, good analysis, clear structure and expression, a very good understanding of the material covered in lectures, readings and class discussion
- B+ Grade - 85-89%: Above average quality, demonstrates a sound grasp of the question, logically organized and well written, a good understanding of the materials covered in lectures, reading and class discussion
- B Grade - 80-84%
• **B- Grade - 75 – 79%**
• **C+ Grade - 70-74%**: Competent and satisfactory work, but contains little analysis and demonstrates only a limited understanding of the materials covered in lectures, readings and class discussion
• **C Grade – 65-69%**
• **C- Grade – 60-64%**
• **D Grade – 55-59%**: Work that demonstrates little knowledge of the material, contains no analysis, and is poorly written. Improvement in all areas needed.
• **Fail - Below 55%**: Does not satisfy assignment requirements

**Plagiarism**
Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. It involves using the work of another person and presenting it as one’s own. One of the most important elements of good academic practice involves acknowledging carefully the people whose ideas we have borrowed or paraphrased in a written assignment. There is nothing wrong in using someone else’s words or ideas so long as they are properly acknowledged through correct referencing procedures. **Information on this can be found in the document ‘Writing Essays in History’, available on the course Blackboard site under Course Information.** Anyone committing blatant plagiarism will receive an automatic ‘F’ grade for that assignment.

**Statement on Disability Accommodations**
Any student who requires accommodation because of a physical or learning disability must contact Disability Support Services (http://www.gvsu.edu/dss) at 616-331-2490 as soon as possible. After you have documented your disability, please make an appointment or see me during office hours to discuss your specific needs.

**Expectations**
My job as instructor is to facilitate your learning of the course materials. Specifically I will present all lectures, facilitate class discussions, assist your understanding of the assigned readings, answer your questions, and help you develop your writing and research skills. I will also fairly and impartially grade your work.

Your role as students is to learn the material, attend all classes punctually and complete all course assignments. Specifically, you must do the assigned readings **before** class, attend punctually, ask questions respectfully and participate in class discussion. If you experience difficulties in keeping up with or understanding the course materials, the sooner you see me for assistance the better.

*Remember, education is like joining a gym. You don’t get fit by just turning up, but only by working hard!*
Semester Schedule

- **Mondays and Wednesdays** will both feature formal lectures of 50 minutes duration each. All lectures will be illustrated with PowerPoint.
- **Friday** classes will feature in-class discussion, which will be led by students. All class members are expected to lead one discussion session during the semester (in teams). As noted above, you will be assessed for your discussion leadership and ongoing contribution to discussion throughout the semester, which is worth 20% of course grade.
- NB. A set of notes for each lecture will be available on Blackboard a week or so before each class. **You should print up a set of these notes and bring them to class.**
- To make sure everyone stays awake, certain pieces of crucial information will be missing from your set of notes, but will be on the screen. All you need to do is pay attention and fill in the blanks on your set of notes!

**Week One: Cosmos**

**Mon Aug 30:** Lect 1 – Course Introduction  
(Reading: Christian Intro. pp1 ff – NB. ff means ‘and following’)

**Wed Sep 1:** Lect 2 - Origins of the Universe  
(Reading: Christian chap. 1 pp17ff)

**Fri Sep 3:** NB. **No Class Today** (I have to be in Chicago for a meeting of the AP World History Development Committee)

**Week Two: Stars**

**Mon Sept 6:** Labor Day Holiday – No Class

**Wed Sept 8:** Lect 3 – History and relevance of Stars  
(Reading: Christian chap. 2 pp 39ff)

**Fri Sept 10:** Discussion 1: **Origins of Universe and Stars**
- **Is it possible to reconcile the scientific account with religious accounts of the origins of the universe?**
- **What is a star, exactly?**
- **How do stars create new elements when they die?**
- **Was Joni Mitchell right when she sang the line ‘We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion year old carbon’ in the song ‘Woodstock’?**

**Week Three: Earth**

**Mon Sept 13:** Lect 4 - Origins of the Solar System  
(Reading: Christian chap. 3, pp 57 ff)
Wed Sept 15: Lect 5 - Plate Tectonics and the Shaping of the Early Earth  
(Reading as above)

Fri Sept 17: Discussion 2: The Shaping of the Earth  
- How can we be so sure about the date of the age of the earth and solar system?  
- What are the main pieces of evidence to support the theory of ‘plate tectonics’?  
- How can geologists be so sure about the composition of the early atmosphere?  
- Are we just lucky that the earth evolved in the location and manner that it did?

Week Four: Life  
Mon Sept 20: Lect 6 - Evolution and the Nature of Life  
(Reading: Christian chap. 4 and 5 pp 79/107 ff)

Wed Sept 22: Lect 7 - Origins of Life on Earth  
(Reading: Christian chap. 4 and 5 as above)

Fri Sept 24: Discussion 3: Evolution and the Origins of Life  
- What is life? What distinguishes life from non-life?  
- How would you explain the theory of (and evidence for) Darwinian evolution by natural selection to a non-scientist?  
- Why do some people have trouble accepting evolution?  
- How would you explain DNA to a member of the public?  
- How likely is it that there is life somewhere else in the universe?  
- How does modern science explain the origins of life on earth?

Week Five: Human Revolution  
Mon Sept 27: Lect 8 - Evolution of Humans: The Hominids  
(Reading: Christian chap 6 pp 139ff)

Wed Sept 29: Lect 9 - The Human Revolution  
(Reading: Christian chap. 7 pp 171 ff)

Fri Oct 1: NB. No Class Today (I have to be at Princeton University for a meeting of the SAT World History Development Committee)

Week Six: Foragers to Farmers  
Mon Oct 4: Lect 10 - The Paleolithic Era of Human History  
(Reading: Christian chap. 7 pp 171 ff)
Wed Oct 6: Lect 11 - The Origins of Agriculture
(Reading: Christian chap. 8 pp 207ff)

Fri Oct 8: Discussion 4: From Foraging to Farming
- How did humans live for the first 95% of our history?
- What do some historians mean when they describe the Paleolithic Era as the ‘original affluent society’?
- What impact did Paleolithic humans have on global environments?
- Why did some human communities make the transition from hunter-gathering to farming? Was this a conscious decision?
- What does David Christian mean by ‘the trap of sedentism’?
- How would human history have been different if there had been no agricultural revolution?

Week Seven: Power
Mon Oct 11: Lect 12 - Early Agrarian Societies
(Reading: Christian chap.8 pp 207 ff)

Wed Oct 13: Lect 13 - Early Power Structures
(Reading: Christian chap. 9 pp 245 ff)

Fri Oct 15: Discussion 5: Early Agrarian Era and Power
- What were some of the technological limitations on farming during the early agrarian era?
- How did agriculture spread during the era?
- Outline some differences in village life around the globe during this era. How do we explain these differences?
- What is power?
- What sort of tasks did early human communities need leaders for?
- Outline the difference between consensual and coercive power
- Did coercive power corrupt those who first began to wield it?

Week Eight: Cities, States, Civilizations
Mon Oct 18: Lect 14 - The First Cities and States
(Reading: Christian chap. 9 pp 245 ff)

Wed Oct 20: Lec15 - The Era of Agrarian Civilizations I: Afroeurasia
(Reading: Christian chap. 10 pp 283 ff)

Fri Oct 22: Discussion 6: Cities, States, Civilizations
- How do we explain the quite rapid appearance of cities in Mesopotamia late in the 4th millennium BCE?
- Is the appearance of cities and states necessarily a sign of progress?
- How did population growth affect the nature of political systems?
- What is the difference between states and agrarian civilizations?
• How did some states become so powerful?
• Did agrarian civilizations encourage or discourage population growth? Or technological innovation?

Week Nine: Civilizations and Exchanges
Mon Oct 25: Lect 16 - Era of Agrarian Civilizations II: The Americas
(Reading: Christian chap. 10)


Fri Oct 29: Discussion 7: Civilizations and Exchanges
• Why did agrarian civilizations appear late in the Americas?
• Why did cultures and communities in North America never evolve into full agrarian civilizations?
• Compare the era of agrarian civilizations in Afroeurasia and the Americas. What differences and similarities do you see?
• Why is the role of pastoral nomads often neglected in world history?
• Outline some of the most important intellectual exchanges that took place along the Silk Roads
• How would the history of humanity have been different if there had been no Silk Roads exchanges?

Week Ten: Modern Revolution
Mon Nov 1: Lect 18 - The Modern Revolution
(Reading: Christian chap. 11 pp 335 ff)

Wed Nov 3: Lect 19 – On the Eve of Modernity
(Reading: Christian chap. 12 pp 364ff)

Fri Nov 5: Discussion 8: The Modern Revolution
• What features distinguish modern from agrarian societies?
• Why did these features appear in Western Europe first?
• What has been the relative importance of population growth and technological innovation in creating the modern revolution?
• Why do historians argue that an industrial revolution nearly occurred in Song China? Why was it not sustained?
• Why were the small commercial states of pre-modern Europe so dynamic, compared to the great agrarian civilizations?
• What was the global significance of the voyages of Columbus?
**Week Eleven: Industrialism**

**Mon Nov 8:** Lect 20 - The Industrial Revolution in Britain  
(Reading: Christian chap. 13 pp 406ff)

**Wed Nov 10:** Lect 21 - The Industrial Revolution in Europe and the USA (Reading: Christian chap. 13 pp 406 ff)

**Fri Nov 12:** **Discussion 9: The Industrial Revolution**
- Why did the industrial revolution occur in Britain first?
- Would the industrial revolution in Britain have been possible without a social and the agricultural revolution?
- Why did the Industrial Revolution spread?
- What were the main changes in Western Europe and the early United States associated with the industrial revolution?
- How does the modern ‘state’ differ from traditional states?
- What was the ultimate significance to human history of the Napoleonic Era in France?

**Week Twelve: Impacts of Industrialism**

**Mon Nov 15:** Lect 22 - The Social Impact of the Industrial Revolution  
(Reading: own research)

**Wed Nov 17:** Lect 23 - The Environmental Impact of the Industrial Revolution (Reading: own research)

**Fri Nov 19:** **Discussion 10: Impacts of the Industrial Revolution**
- What were living conditions like for people living in the newly industrial cities of Manchester, London, Berlin?
- What measures did governments begin to take to alleviate some of the social problems caused by industrialization?
- What impact did underground railways have on urban growth and people’s lives?
- What were some of the environmental impacts of industrialization in the industrialized nations of the world?
- What environmental impact did industrialization have on the non-industrialized regions of the world (like India and Africa)?

**Week Thirteen: 20th Century**

**Mon Nov 22:** Lect 24 – The Twentieth Century I  
(Reading: Christian chap. 14 pp 440 ff)

**Wed Nov 24:** No Class - Thanksgiving

**Fri Nov 26:** No Class - Thanksgiving
**Week Fourteen: Environment and Near Future**

Wed Nov 29: Lect 25 – The Twentieth Century II: The Environment  
(Reading: as above)

Wed Dec 1: Lect 26 - The Future I: The Next 100 Years  
(Reading: Christian chap. 15 p467 ff)

Fri Dec 3: **NB. No Class Today** (I have to be in Atlanta for a meeting of the AP World History Development Committee)

**Week Fifteen: Distant Future**

Mon Dec 6: **NB. No Class Today** (I have to be in Atlanta for a meeting of the AP World History Development Committee)

Wed Dec 8: Lecture 27 - The Future II: The Distant Future  
(Reading: Christian chap. 15 p467)

Fri Dec 10: **Discussion 11: The Future**

- What are the main environmental problems facing humans as a result of environmental impacts in the 20th Century?
- What will be the impact of these over the next century?
- What is the ultimate future of the human race, planet Earth, our solar system, and the universe?
- What are you looking forward to, in terms of your intellectual development, about the next four years?
- How do you plan to make a difference to the world?

**Final Exam: TBA**