Chair’s Welcome

PABLO MITCHELL, CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND COMPARATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

Welcome to the 2014-15 newsletter of the Department of History at Oberlin College! I am fortunate, during my first year as chair, to have the support and guidance of the department’s wonderful administrative assistant, Kathy King. I am also grateful to Shelley Lee, associate professor of history and comparative American studies, for helping to produce this inaugural edition.

Last May, 46 history majors (and 11 history minors) graduated from Oberlin. We currently have 70 history majors. We accepted six students into our honors program, and they are preparing projects under the supervision of honors coordinator Renee Romano.

In addition to a busy teaching and research schedule, the department hosted several guest speakers in the fall, including Kunal Parker, who presented a lecture titled Immigrants and Other Foreigners in America, and J. Brent Morris, who spoke about Oberlin and the antislavery movement.

In a joint collaboration with the Comparative American Studies Program, Oberlin faculty, staff, and students also gathered to celebrate new books published in the last year by history and CAS faculty.

As we look toward the future, we are delighted to be welcoming two new tenure-track faculty members next fall. Danielle Terrazas Williams received her PhD in history at Duke University after writing a dissertation titled “Capitalizing Subjects: Free African-Descended Women of Means in Xalapa, Veracruz, during the Long Seventeenth Century.” She will teach Latin American history survey classes and classes on women in Latin America and Colonial Latin America.


Please enjoy the rest of the newsletter and thank you for your support of the history department!
2014 (see page 3 of this newsletter.) The book was recently reviewed in the Washington Post, and Professor Romano spoke about the book on the NPR program The Takeaway. Last year she introduced a new course on the History of Whiteness in the United States.


HEATHER HOGAN participated in a roundtable titled Gender and Leadership at the annual meeting of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies in November 2014 in San Antonio, Texas.

PABLO MITCHELL published History of Latinos: Exploring Diverse Roots (Greenwood Press, 2014). The textbook explores the heritage and history of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and Central and South Americans in the United States and is one of the first historical overviews of the history of Latinos.

MATTHEW R. BAHAR published an article titled "People of the Dawn: Indian Pirates and the Violent Theft of an Atlantic World" in The Journal of American History. Matt has taught at Oberlin for the last three years.

SHULAMIT MAGNUS’s translation and critical edition of the second volume of Pauline Wengeroff, Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century, was published by Stanford University Press in September. Wengeroff’s Memoirs, published for the first time in 1908, in Berlin, are an unprecedented source by a Jewish woman. In this, second volume, Wengeroff (1833-1916) refracts the changes that transformed Russian Jewish society from the 1850s-90s through her experiences and those of her family, taking an acute historical perspective on the personal and a personal perspective on the political. The volume has been awarded the Hadassah-Brandeis Translation Award. Magnus’s edition of Volume One of Wengeroff’s Memoirs was awarded the National Jewish Book Award (2010).

LEONARD V. SMITH is on leave in 2014-15 and will be completing a book on the locus and attributes of sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. In the centenary year of the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he is presenting or lecturing in Italy, Britain, Algeria, and at various colleges and universities in the United States. His recent publications include “Empires at the Paris Peace Conference,” in Empires at War, 1912-1923 (Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., Oxford University Press, 2014), and “Mutiny,” in Cambridge History of the First World War, 3 vols. (Jay Winter, ed., Cambridge University Press, 2014). In the spring of 2015, Smith will be a visiting scholar at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies at The Ohio State University.


SHELLEY LEE published A New History of Asian America (Routledge, 2013), a broad historical overview of the Asian experience in the United States from the 19th century to the recent past. She is now researching a new book project about immigration, ethnic politics, and urban development in Los Angeles in the late 20th century.


NEW COURSE

HIST 485: Past and Future of Higher Education

Professor Steven Volk

Over the past decade, I have been examining the state of higher education in the United States. While talk of its demise is likely premature, I do think higher education faces a greater crisis than at any time previously, at least in terms of its traditional goals of broadening access and providing students with an affordable and transformational experience. I’ve decided to put together a class to explore the Past and Future of Higher Education (HIST 485) as a means of consolidating my thinking on the topic. I hope the class can model some of the positive developments in higher education, in particular ways that technology can creatively impact learning. As a way of trying out some of these ideas, I plan to open this course, which will be offered in Fall 2015, to students, faculty, and a small group of alumni who will be brought into the class via some video conferencing technology (still to be determined). Look for further announcements in the spring!
In 1964 the civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner went missing in Mississippi, their bodies recovered 44 days later. Their murders at the hands of Ku Klux Klansmen galvanized the civil rights movement but saw no legal redress until the state of Mississippi successfully prosecuted Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen in 2005. That trial was part of a wave of “retrospective justice” efforts that have led to the reopening of more than 100 murder cases since the mid-1990s. These trials are also the subject of Professor Renee Romano’s latest book, *Racial Reckoning: Prosecuting America’s Civil Rights Murders* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

The following are excerpts from an interview with Romano that originally appeared in a Harvard University Press blog.

**Q. What prompted your interest in the reopened civil rights trials? Which aspects of your research most surprised you?**

I became interested in civil rights trials when I was working on a project about the historical memory of the civil rights movement. I am very interested in...how different groups represent the past and to what end. I was exploring different sites where the movement is represented—films, fiction, museums, monuments—and I realized that the courtroom was another key place where the movement was being discussed and portrayed...What surprised me most, perhaps, were the ways in which contemporary prosecutions have become the subject of a political struggle between those who support them as a way to close the door on the past and those who hope to harness to them as a political project of shedding new light on the past in order to promote social and racial justice in the present.

**Q. What forces conspired to make the 1990s the moment when prosecutions for crimes committed 30 years earlier were finally reopened?**

That project became more possible in the 1990s for a host of reasons. For one thing, the civil rights movement succeeded in changing many people’s attitudes about racial discrimination. Many Americans came to embrace the idea that the law should treat people equally regardless of race. In that environment, unpunished racially motivated killings became more disturbing, and it became easier for relatives to make the case that it was worth the time and effort to put now-elderly men in jail.

Journalists played a huge role in getting these civil rights-era murder cases reopened. By the 1990s, there were new sources becoming available to journalists, like the previously secret records of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission...Journalists helped bring attention to civil rights murders, they humanized the victims, and very importantly, they often did the investigative legwork that allowed authorities to reopen cases.

Finally, by the 1990s and 2000s, a new generation of white southern political figures was coming to realize that the South as a region continued to be stigmatized as racist and backwards in part because so many of these murder cases remained unresolved.

**Q. What do you see as some of the achievements of these trials? What have been their limitations?**

The trials have served some very important functions. They have helped bring attention and awareness to a host of crimes and a history of violence that had often been hidden. They have brought comfort and relief to many relatives of victims who finally feel that their loved ones have been shown some of the respect that they deserve...But trials also have some very serious limitations. The nature of a criminal trial has made it very hard for prosecutions to offer a complex understanding of America’s racial history or to make clear the ways in which racial violence was enabled and fostered by local officials, state authorities, community elites, and often the federal government. Prosecutions also promote a sense of closure and finality; civil rights trials suggest that convicting a few elderly Klansmen closes the door on the past and means that the nation has done all that it needs to address and redress its history of racial violence.

**Q. Scholars like David Blight have taught us that our understanding of the conflicts in our past can be distorted by efforts to put them to rest. What concerns might you have, then, about how these trials may shape how future generations reflect on the civil rights struggle?**

I don't think trials are alone in this. So many of the dominant narratives of the civil rights struggle today suggest that the civil rights movement effectively “solved” racism and that any disparities today must be due to deficient cultural practices or impersonal market forces. But these contemporary prosecutions have been the subject of widespread media coverage and have earned official support and recognition by state and federal governments, which gives the narratives they promote a particular kind of power and legitimacy. I am hopeful, though, that there are committed activists working to use prosecutions to tell a very different story of America’s racial past, one that focuses on the nation’s history of racial terrorism, the role of the state, and the legacies of violence for today.

**Q. The violence that these trials are meant to address is well understood to have been a tool of white supremacy... Do you see the “racial reckoning” of the trials you’ve studied as having a place in [the conversation about the historical and structural perpetuation of white supremacy]?**

Oh, absolutely. My book explores one aspect of the practice of white supremacy and its consequences in depth [and also highlights] the power and importance of understanding history. I see...my work as an...continued on page 4
KATHY KING, DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
I have worked in the history department for five years. Before that I worked in several departments on campus, including the Conservatory of Music. I like the people I get to interact with on a daily basis; the best part is working with Brenda Hall, the administrative assistant for the religion department, with whom I share an office.

I was born and grew up in Lorain, Ohio. My husband and I now live in the country, where we enjoy the abundance of wildlife. Our son Zack lives with his wife, Megan, in Colorado (as does the rest of my family), so we visit twice a year and hope to eventually live there. For many years I have taught bible studies at the church where we belong. We also volunteer with at-risk children and adults. Finally, once a year we travel with friends to a different country. These are friends we have known for 49 years, and we never tire of each other. People are truly the greatest investment you can make.

As for the history department, I’d like people to know that the faculty really care about the students and make themselves available to them. They are always looking to make the department stronger.

UMA VENKATRAMAN ’15,
HONORS STUDENT AND DEPARTMENT ASSISTANT
I decided to become a history major because many of my mentors and favorite teachers in middle and high school had either studied or taught history, and they challenged me to reconsider what history as a subject could mean. More specifically, these teachers introduced me to subaltern and resistance histories and used their classes to criticize how history often gets taught (e.g., the memorization of dates and such).

My favorite class in history at Oberlin has been Modern South Asia: British Imperialism to the Present, with Visiting Assistant Professor Sarah Waheed. I enjoyed this class because Professor Waheed used subaltern methodologies in her class and was always clear about why she did so. Historical texts written by British, educated elites were put in conversation with texts written by people resisting colonization, including queer people, women, and poor and working class South Asians. I also appreciated Professor Waheed’s honesty in connecting her own lived experience to the material we were studying.

In my honors research, I am exploring recent South Asian American migration history. I am excited about looking at post-1965 U.S. immigration history and how South Asian migrant communities in the U.S. interacted and built coalitions with Asian American communities, as well as supported other communities of color, including Black and Latinx communities. Specifically, the project focuses on South Asian feminist histories in Boston during the 1980s and 1990s. I am looking at two organizations: South Asian Women for Action (SAWA) and Saheli, which were organizations founded by South Asian women during the 1990s that engaged in a variety of political work, including support for domestic workers’ rights and sexualized violence prevention.

Through an analysis of these organizations, I aim to highlight the legacy of South Asian feminisms that exists in Boston and also emphasize models of coalition-building that were both successful and unsuccessful during this time period. The overall process has been challenging, but I have deeply appreciated being able to speak with multi-generational, South Asian women and hear their perspectives on organizing.

PUBLICATION, continued
insistence on the need to speak, to tell the story of racism in the United States in its full ugly truth. It's vital that we as a nation understand the ways in which black people were dispossessed, punished for being successful, segregated, and denied legal and economic privileges that the government made available to whites.

It’s also critical that we fully understand the role that violence has played in upholding that racial order and maintaining white supremacy. We often talk about terrorism as if it is something new that started with 9/11. But black Americans have long been subjected to terrorism and politically motivated violence. Understanding that is a critical part of any conversation about the responsibility of the country to address and redress that history, whether through reparations or through other kinds of political initiatives.
IN APPRECIATION

HEATHER HOGAN, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, TO RETIRE IN 2015

The close of the spring 2015 semester will be bittersweet for us all, as it will mark the end of Professor Heather Hogan’s final class at Oberlin, a colloquium on Stalinism. A labor and social historian of Russia and the Soviet Union who was trained at the University of Michigan, Hogan arrived at Oberlin in 1981 and has since spent her entire professorial career here. Her courses and expertise proved especially critical during the 1980s and 1990s as the Soviet Union collapsed, during which time she often felt more like a journalist than a historian and was in high demand for public talks.

Her research career has included her book, Forgiving Revolution: Metalworkers, Managers, and the State in St. Petersburg, 1890-1914 (Indiana University Press, 1993) and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Social Science Research Council. At Oberlin, Hogan has been a pivotal leader, serving as associate dean of faculty development (2010-13), chair of the history department (2002-06), member of the Committee for Faculty Roles, Responsibilities, and Rewards (2000-02), and several times on the College Faculty Council. Although much has changed since 1981 (the typewriter she finished her dissertation with has since been replaced with a sleek laptop), she says the quality of students has always been high. As she thinks about retirement, she looks forward to reading novels and traveling. First on her list is a family trip to Antarctica with her husband, Chris Nielson, daughter Kate Nielson, and son-in-law Mike Darman. Thank you for your decades of superb teaching, scholarship, and service, Professor Hogan. We will miss you and wish you well!

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

We were thrilled and overwhelmed by the volume of alumni responses to our request for updates. Because we were unable to include them all in this short space, we are looking for other ways to disseminate your updates. Meanwhile, here is one, from Bob Weiner ’69.

BOB WEINER ’69, DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST AND POLITICAL COMMENTATOR

The history department at Oberlin changed my life. It gave me perspective for the White House, congressional, and national press positions I’ve been privileged to have. I learned not only a little bit of substance, but MOST importantly how to think critically and synthesize.

At Oberlin, I became a liberal—because I learned what it means to be progressive versus the alternatives. I learned that driving the country in a way that helps those who have the least is how we strengthen the nation. I learned the conservative versus liberal philosophies of robber barons and oil tycoons, and I did not like what they did to amass wealth at the hands of their workers.

I learned what bad wars were—and good wars with a rational pur-

pose, like fighting the Nazis. As we learned how to fight against a U.S. War in Vietnam, coupled with my classmates’ banding together for anti-war marches in Washington and surrounding recruiters’ cars in Oberlin outside Peters Hall—I learned you CAN oppose U.S. wars against other countries and change national policy as a result.

In my positions as chiefs of staff and communications director for [a variety of] congressional committees and White House offices, and now as a national op-ed writer and reporter, radio and television host, and event organizer and emcee at the National Press Club (most recently with Sen. Charles Schumer and Rep. Jim Clyburn), I always keep in mind the perspectives I learned in the history department at Oberlin! To this day it gives me the grounding I need to hopefully make good policy and priority decisions—and ask the right questions! THANK YOU, OBERLIN HISTORY!

HISTORY DEPARTMENT FACULTY AND STAFF

Pablo Mitchell, Professor (History and Comparative American Studies) and Chair (Fall 2014)
Zeinab Abul-Magd, Associate Professor
Matthew R. Bahar, Assistant Professor (on leave 2014-15)
Henryatta Ballah, Visiting Assistant Professor
Michael H. Fisher, Robert S. Danforth Professor and Chair (Spring 2015)
Heather Hogan, Professor
David Kelley, Associate Professor and Director of East Asian Studies
Jiyul Kim, Visiting Assistant Professor
Clayton Koppes, Professor
Carol Lasser, Professor and Director of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies
Shelley Lee, Associate Professor (History and Comparative American Studies)
Shulamit Magnus, Professor (History and Jewish Studies; on leave 2014-15)
Emer O’Dwyer, Assistant Professor (History and East Asian Studies)
Rebecca Mitchell, Visiting Assistant Professor
Willis Okech Oyugi, Visiting Assistant Professor
John Ragosta, Visiting Assistant Professor
Gil Ribak, Visiting Professor (History and Jewish Studies)
Renee Romano, Professor (History, Africana Studies, and Comparative American Studies)
Annemarie Sammartino, Associate Professor
Leonard V. Smith, Frederick B. Arts Professor
Steven Volk, Professor and Director of the Center for Teaching Innovation and Excellence
Ellen Wurtzel, Assistant Professor
Kathy King, Administrative Assistant
Uma Venkatraman, Student Assistant