Course description and goals

This seminar traces the development of notions of possession, property and ownership in Europe from c. 900 to 1600. In a period marked by both tremendous expansion and convulsive crisis in Europe, a very diffused notion of ownership gave way to an exclusive and formal one derived from Roman law and a scholastic natural rights tradition. This change did more than redefine a legal concept, it also connected people, shaped communities, and created boundaries in fundamentally new ways. We will investigate both the roots and implications of this shift and the spiritual, social, economic, and political work that these terms were called on to do.

While there are no prerequisites for the course, a general knowledge of medieval and early modern European history helps (textbook recommendations below). Over the course of the semester, you will complete readings and written exercises that are designed to familiarize you with both historiographical debates and the nature of available sources. You will also act as collaborators and sounding boards for others in the class, so informed participation in discussion is essential! Finally, you will conduct, in stages, a research project that analyzes a material object or theoretical approach from the early modern period and engages with property and/or possession in some fashion. The individual components of the project (totaling 50% of your grade) are broken down below and will be discussed more fully in the first few weeks of class.

Course materials:
All required books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and are on reserve in the library.

Required:
Barbara Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: the social meaning of Cluny’s property*, 909-1049 (1989)

Recommended textbooks:

**Finding and doing the assignments**: All required books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and are on reserve in the library. Readings posted on blackboard are labeled Bb. They are located under Course Documents in the file “Reading Assignments”.

**Course Requirements and Grading:**
All work must be turned in to receive credit for the course. The breakdown of grades is as follows:
- Short essay: 15%
- Collaborative Project: 15%
- Class participation: 20%
- Final Research project: (50% total)
  - Research prospectus, primary source analysis and literature/historiographical review: 5% each (15% total)
  - 12 pp. of rough draft: 5% (ungraded, A for turning it in!)
  - Final paper 20 pp: 30%

Grading based on the following: A+ 100-97; A 96-93; A- 92-90; B+ 89-87; B 86-83; B- 82-80; C+ 79-77; C 76-73; C- 72-70; D 65-69, F below 65.

**Details:**

**Short essay.** You will explore your own relationship to an object/possession and evaluate that relationship in light of the theoretical approaches we’ve discussed so far. You may also choose to write about an object/collection you find on our first field trip.

**Collaborative work with students in biology and comparative literature:** I will explain how this works in coming weeks but we will have three class times together to discuss our disciplinary approaches and to work on a group project that you will present on March 6.

**Class participation:** well-informed, respectful and, of course, brilliant! (ok, thoughtful will do)

**Research Paper:** This will be your original research on either 1. a material object (loosely defined) that you use as a primary source and contextualize or 2. a theoretical approach to
property, possession or ownership produced in the late medieval-early modern period or a modern one that you use to analyze developments/objects in the early modern period. I will describe in more detail the rest of the research components in separate documents, but you will be responsible for: 1. a short prospectus outlining your topic and questions you want to raise and identifying possible primary and secondary sources, 2. a source analysis, 3. an annotated bibliography or literature review, 4. a rough draft and 5. a final paper. We will be presenting ideas and working on some of these sections in small groups (this is how professors work too!)

All written assignments should be typed and double-spaced, with ½-1 inch margins on all sides. All pages numbered! Your grade takes note of the brilliance of your ideas but also the clarity of your expression, the ironclad tightness of your grammar and the impeccability of your spelling. Proofread! Edit! When you have citations and you need to include footnotes and a bibliography, refer to some of the reference guides from the Oberlin History Department that I have posted on Blackboard. When in doubt, get in touch with me.

Class Policies:

Attendance and participation: If you are able, please let me know before class begins that you will be absent. In a seminar that meets only once a week, 3 or more unexcused absences can result in a failing grade or being dropped from the course.

Disabilities: If you have specific physical, psychiatric, or learning disabilities and require accommodations, please let me know early in the semester so that your learning needs may be appropriately met. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to Jane Boomer in the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28.

Lateness: Late assignments will be penalized by dropping 3 points from your grade every day a paper is late.

Plagiarism: All work turned in for this course must be your own. The College requires that students sign an "Honor Code" for all assignments. This pledge states: "I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment." For further information, see the student Honor Code which you can access via Blackboard>Lookup/Directories>Honor Code. If you turn something in without pledging the honor code, I will wait to grade it until you do. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me or raise it in class.

Class Schedule

Section I Thoughts and Theories

Week 1 What IS property? Possession and dispossession

2/2 Introduction

2/4 Ownership in the western tradition
Is property a natural right? An instinct? What kind of work does the notion of property do for different societies?


Week 2 How do we assign meanings to objects?

2/9 *Field trip—dress warmly! Bring a pad of paper and something to write with

The Life Cycles of Things
Does our modern western notion of property, or humans’ relations to objects, derive from the particular mode of production we use (capitalism)? Both readings concern the circulation of goods. Marx in particular is very dense; try to understand how he is defining private property, fetishism of the object, and why they derive from the way we work and exchange things.


2/11 Objects of Desire (discussion about Marx and Appadurai)
Do you think collectors are a special breed of people or is collecting symptomatic of a consumerist culture? How does desire figure into all of the reading we’ve done so far?

Bb. Susan Sontag, The Volcano Lover (1992) (selections)

Due: 3-5 page short essay

Section II Possession and Holiness

Week 3 Painful pleasure? Literature History, Biology

2/16 Multidisciplinary Approaches to Venus in Furs Meeting place TBA

*We will begin collaborative work with two other groups of students (from Taylor Allen’s biology and Stiliana Milkova’s comparative literature classes)

2/18 Research I
Meet in Mudd. Visit with Jennifer Starkey, history department research librarian


**Week 4 Material pain, Spiritual Pleasure?**

2/23 *Field trip: Meet at the Allen Memorial Art Museum
Saints and Martyrs
How do we recognize and represent holiness? What is the connection between pleasure, pain and sanctity?

Bb. Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legends* (c. 1260), introduction, selections
Greg Buzwell, *Saints in Medieval Manuscripts*, (University of Toronto, 2005): 5-37

2/25 Relics
What power do relics have? Why do you think they were such a tremendous part of medieval life? What does it mean that they are often fragmented/dismembered bodies, and in constant circulation?


**Week 5 Property-fixed to movable, sanctified to suspicious**

3/1 Monastic property
How does Rosenwein define property? What are her sources? What is her thesis and what does she need to discuss in order to prove it? (Think about what you need to know to understand property in 10th- and 11th-century Europe (besides Latin)).


3/3 Franciscans, the commercial economy and gendered gifts
What is Little and Rosenwein’s argument here? What is the connection between voluntary poverty and a commercial economy? Do people possess things differently in the 13th and 14th centuries than they did in the time Rosenwein described earlier? Howell’s argument also centers on the way property is changing from a gift to a profit economy, but focuses on the way that gender shapes inheritance: what does she do that builds on Little and Rosenwein and with what does she disagree?


**Week 6**
3/8 Group Presentations and Pizza! Meeting place TBA
**Due:** Virtual Exhibition

3/10 Research II
Individual meetings with me about your research projects. Sign up on blackboard

**Week 7 Bodily Possession**

3/15 Demonic/Divine
How did medieval people differentiate between demonic and divine possession, and how did it change? In what ways did spiritual possession define identity, according to Caciola? In what ways did bodily possession depend on notions of gender difference, and why do you think that was the case? How does Caciola deal with the question of sources for her account of mystical experiences? Can we make a connection between questions of possession and control of property that we have discussed previously?

Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* (skim introduction, read chapter 1, chapter 2 pp. 79-87, 98-113 (Margaret of Cortona) only, chapter 3. Bb. Angela of Foligno, *Memorial* (selections)

3/17 The Exorcist, medieval style
Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* chapter 5 (all), chapter 6 309-319 only

**Due:** Please email me 1-2 pp. prospectus outlining your topic and questions you want to raise and identifying possible primary and secondary sources.

**Week 8-Spring Break!! 3/21-3/25** (I will put you in small working groups over break)

**Section III. Property and Power, public and private**

**Week 9 Family**

3/29 Marriage, Inheritance
Why is marriage an important topic in discussing western notions of property? Do women and men describe property differently, or use it differently, in the Middle Ages? Note: two of these readings are about Italian families/marriages (Klapisch-Zuber and Dati’s *Diary*); be careful of generalizing to all of Europe in this period.


3/31 **NO CLASS**
Due: analysis of source/s; distribute to your group both an excerpt of the primary source and your analysis of it. Include a set of questions/ideas of what you think you need to know to answer your questions about your sources. Please email it to your group and to me by Friday 4/1 9PM.

Week 10 Circulating Knowledge?

4/5 Created and classified

4/5 Extra Credit if you go! *4:30-5:30PM Lecture by Robert Tittler, "Social Aspiration and the Malleability of Portraiture in Post-Reformation England 1540-1640” Wilder 101. He is an emeritus professor of History at Concordia University, a prolific scholar of early modern cities and the Reformation, and an Obie (OC ’64).

4/7 Renaissance objects

Week 11 Sovereignty, Territory and Personhood

4/12 Colonialism and Conquest
Patricia Seed, Ceremonies of Possession, introduction, chs. 1-3 (1-99)

4/14 The Dispossessed
Finish Ceremonies of Possession, chs 3-4, conclusion (100-148, 179-194)

Due Sunday 4/17 8PM. Literature review of secondary sources (books and articles) about your topic

Week 12 Enlightenment Property Debates

4/19 Enshrining natural rights to property
Locke is famous for theorizing a right to property that exists in a state of nature, prior to any social arrangements we might make. What do we do that legitimates our ownership of things? Why do you think this right (among others) lies at the heart of his imagined perfect polity? What constitutes slavery and freedom?

Bb. John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (1681), selections
4/21 On the other Hand…
Bb. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) and *The Social Contract* (1762), selections

**Week 13 Owning (New) Intangibles**

4/26 When do ideas become worth taking?
The idea of copyright only emerges for the first time in late 17th-century England; at the same time a notion of authorship is also solidifying. Connection to capitalism?


4/28 When do they become worth citing?

**Week 14 Possession of Knowledge (i.e., your research paper)**

5/3 No Class. Open office hours for this class only

**Due 4PM:** 12 pages of your rough draft. I will give comments

5/5 Peer Review; Conclusion and Party!

**Final Paper due:** Saturday May 14th at 11am. Email me your paper at ewurtzel@oberlin.edu. Do not forget the honor code!