

Can It Happen Here Again? Yale, Slavery, and Legacies.

Devane Lectures, Fall semester, 2024, 11:30 am, Tuesday and Thursday.

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“They may say ‘Peace, Peace!’ as much as they like;
I know there’s going to be war!”

- Harriet Tubman, 1860

“The Civil War draws us as an oracle, darkly unriddled
and portentous, of personal as well as national fate.”

- Robert Penn Warren, 1961

“Why America is the only free nation on earth. Besides! Country’s
too big for a revolution. No, no! Couldn’t happen here.”

- Sinclair Lewis, 1935

“The mission of this war is national regeneration.”

- Frederick Douglass, 1863

“I was with Grant... I had always known everything about the Civil
War. There never will be anything more interesting in America than
that Civil War, never.”

- Gertrude Stein, 1933

“Day by day, and almost minute by minute, the past was brought up
to date... All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed
exactly as often as was necessary.”

- George Orwell, 1949

“(Open your eyes and ears to every fact connected with the actual
condition of slavery everywhere – but do not talk about it – hear and
see everything, but say little).”

- Benjamin Silliman, Sr., Yale, 1833

As citizens of the United States and the world, we live in a time of reckoning for the very idea of liberal democracy and, therefore, of the mission of universities and colleges, most of which strive to uphold and advance the ideals of democracy. Primary and secondary schools, curriculums, the freedom to read and learn are also under pressures unlike anything we have experienced at least since the early Cold War. Inside and outside the gates of universities, academic freedom, the pursuit of diversity, the faith in universals, and the fate of political, legal, and social institutions are at stake in our world. For at least two decades universities in the United States and other nations have been investigating their pasts and writing their own histories. This phenomenon is part of and a result of profound changes in how communities of learning have come to study historical memory and how publics have come to learn about and struggle to shape or control memory in museums, in popular culture, and in politics.

Universities, like the societies and nations in which they live, have histories, and they merit critical examination, as well as careful, engaging storytelling. The histories of nations intersect with educational institutions, with the localities and the polities in which they exist. This course will consist of three parts. First, we will study the history of Yale University's connections to and entanglements with racial slavery and its afterlives; second, we will explore in some depth the first existential crisis of the American experiment – the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction – as it swept the nation into destruction and rebirth; and third, we will take up the many legacies of that period – political, constitutional, racial, economic, and commemorative – as they have shaped American life and polity ever since.

“Can it happen here,” has been, as one scholar wrote, a “standard refrain” in American history since the classic novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis in 1935. We will read that novel in this course. To Lewis, and among most who use the phrase today, “it” meant some variation of the fascism that marched across the world of the 1930s. Today the question has revived in relation to American party politics. But the “it” might be several things: the collapse of major institutions, the erosion or destruction of Constitutional norms and authority, low-intensity, but deadly civil unrest, climate catastrophes that cause violent social chaos, internal coup de etat, the emergence of modern forms of neo-slavery, or even some form of civil war. In recent years, Americans, and the wide world that watches us intently, have wondered if America might be politically breaking. Are we on the brink of falling into a new variation of “it” and how does our *history* help us understand this moment in time?

The Devane Lecture course is by tradition open to any and all public and community members in the New Haven region. And the course is a regular lecture offering in history, cross-listed in other departments, for undergraduates. The lectures for the course will be video-taped and streamed to the broad public. Lectures are organized roughly in the following order:

1. Three lectures as introductions, one providing explanations of the course; and the second and third an exploration of the meaning of “legacy” in both democratic and un-democratic societies and governments.

II. Several lectures will tell the story of Yale, slavery, and abolition rooted in the findings of *Yale and Slavery: A History* (2024) and the research project upon which it is based. This section will involve documentation and sources of many kinds housed in the Beinecke and Sterling Libraries.

III. The larger group of lectures on the causes and consequences of disunion, the Civil war, emancipation, and Reconstruction eras in American history.

IV. Four lectures on the crisis of representative democracy – in universities, in the American nation, and in the world.

I am delighted to be working with four extraordinarily talented teaching assistants in this course: Ella Starkman-Hynes, Wulfstun Scouller, Jackie Wu, and Emily Yankowitz. All are advanced graduate students in history at Yale. One, Emily, did extensive research for the Yale and Slavery project. Other key members of the Yale and Slavery Research Project, especially Hope McGrath and Charles Warner, may contribute as well to lectures and sections.

This course works from an assumption that racial slavery was a central theme of the history of the Americas, and its many endings and legacies live with us still. The course takes seriously the existence and meaning of nations, their actions, their fates, their meanings. The course will then pose the famous Lewis question, “can it happen here?” In Lewis’s time, 1930s, the “it” was fascism. The “it” in this case is intended to mean not only slavery and its myriad forms of enduring inequalities, but also the very existence of a pluralistic, democratic, multi-ethnic government and society rooted in the rule of law and living under a common constitution. There have been many pivot or hinge points in American history when the nature and existence of the American experiment, as well as human freedom and rights were on the line.

The Civil War and Reconstruction era has much to teach us about how, why, or if a democracy can survive in the modern world. Therefore, the “it” does mean many forms of authoritarianism, as well as the myriad ways democracy can erode or collapse. Throughout, we will sustain a keen interest in the roles universities have played in this story. And, we will proceed with the assumption that past and present are always and perhaps everywhere deeply intertwined. The pursuit of knowing the past is always a crooked, twisting path; so much of history may be irretrievable, but much of it is attainable in archives and books shouting at us to look and find its remnants. The joy is in the search.

In one of the most courageous works of history ever written, *The Historian’s Craft*, Marc Bloch, a French scholar of feudalism and medieval peasantry, reminded us that past and present are forever mingled. He called this connection the “solidarity of the ages,” in a book he began writing while fighting in the French resistance against the Nazis in 1940-41. Bloch was eventually captured and executed by a firing squad in a field, but not before finishing approximately two-thirds of a draft of this now classic book. How well and tragically Bloch understood the past-present entanglement, as he fled and then was consumed by the Holocaust. Calmly, heroically, he could declare that “misunderstanding of the present is the

inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past.” Bloch would not leave us self-satisfied, though, with such a perennial complaint. “But a man may wear himself out,” he continued, “just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.” Ignorance of the dead or the living was not a moral option for Bloch. Nor is it for us either in the third decade of the twenty-first century. This is precisely why legacies matter so much; they are where past and present collide with consequences we all will reap, and sometimes when we least expect it.

Requirements:

1. Two take-home papers, one on Part I of the course and one on Part II. Prompts will be provided with choices. (approximately 20-25 per cent each of final grade).
2. An in class, blue-book final examination, comprehensive of the entire course, scheduled during finals week. (40 per cent of final grade).
3. Attendance at weekly discussion sections. (10-15 per cent of final grade).

Readings: The following texts are required and are available at the Yale Book Store on Broadway Street. Other articles, chapters, and shorter readings will also be assigned and will be placed on the Canvas server and indicated by an * in the syllabus.

David W. Blight, with the Yale and Slavery Research Project, *Yale and Slavery: A History*, Yale University Press.

Cass R. Sunstein, ed., *Can It Happen Here?* Dey St., William Morrow.

Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, a novel, Signet Classics.

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, David W. Blight, ed., Bedford Books.

William Gienapp, ed., *Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection*, Norton.

Charles R. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*, University of Virginia Press.

Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, Harvard University Press.

Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877*. Harper & Row.

K. Stephen Prince, ed., *Radical Reconstruction: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford Books.

*Readings listed with asterisk in the syllabus are placed on the server. They are all article or chapter length.

Outline of Weekly Classes and Assignments

Week 1, Thurs. Aug. 29:

1. Introductions: Why Does the Civil War and Reconstruction Have a Hold on American

Historical Imagination/and, How Does the Era Inform Our Current Divisions? Reading:
 *Drew Faust, "We Should Grow Too Fond of It": Why We Love the Civil War" (2004);
 Stephanie McCurry, "Why Do We Love Our Civil War? (2012).

Week 2, Sept. 3, 5: (sections begin!).

1. Does Memory Matter? Why Are Universities Studying Slavery and Their pasts?
2. Is the American Republic on the Eve of Destruction or Renewal? What is the "It" and What is a "Legacy?"

Reading: Introduction, Yale and Slavery; in Sunstein, *Can it Happen Here?* Read Sunstein, 57-80, and Stephen Holmes, 387-428.

Week 3, Sept. 10, 12:

1. The 18th Century Founding of Yale and its Many Contexts: Native American Dispossession and the Puritan Vision.
2. Yale, Slavery, and the American Revolutionary Era.

Reading: *Yale and Slavery*, chs. 1-4; *documents to be assigned.

Week 4, Sept. 17, 19:

1. Yale, the Early Republic, and the 1831 Black College, guest lecture by Michael Morand.
2. Antebellum Yale and the Coming of the Civil War.

Reading: *Yale and Slavery*, chs. 5-8; *documents to be assigned.

Week 5, Sept. 24, 26:

1. The Civil War and its Legacies at Yale. (**visit the Yale War Memorial)
2. Ideologies and Economies: Southern World Views/Northern World Views.
 Reading: *Yale and Slavery*, chs. 9-12 and Interludes; Gienapp, part I, p. 3-40.

Week 6, Oct. 1, 3:

1. "Mexico Will Poison Us": War of Conquest, the Compromise, and Kansas-Nebraska.
2. "No Rights": Dred Scott, Bleeding Kansas, and the Impending Crisis of the Union.
 Reading: Douglass, *Narrative*; Douglass, *"What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?";
 "The Nebraska Controversy – the True Issue"; "The Ballot and the Bullet."

Week 7, Oct. 8, 10:

1. John Brown's Holy War, 1860 Election, and the Secession Crisis.
2. Irrepressible or Needless/Slavery or States' Rights? What Caused the Civil War?
 Reading: Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*; *numerous Lincoln documents assigned;
 *responses

to John Brown by Herman Melville and Jefferson Davis; *Blight, "Was the Civil War Inevitable?" *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 25, 2022.

Week 8, Oct. 15:

1. Terrible Swift Sword: Confederate Ascendancy and Ultimate Defeat.
Reading: *Jonathan Lear, "Gettysburg Mourning."
**Fall Recess, Oct. 16-21.

Week 9, Oct. 22, 24:

1. Never Call Retreat: Military Turning Points and Why the North Won the War.
2. Homefronts and Battlefronts: The Social Impact of Total War.
Reading: McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*.

Week 10, Oct. 29, 31:

1. Who Freed the Slaves: Lincoln, Leadership and Emancipation Policy.
2. Days of Jubilee: The Process of Emancipation and Union Victory.
Reading: *Lincoln documents; Gienapp, part 2, 165-178, 261-280; *excerpts, Berlin, ed., *Free At Last*.

Week 11, Nov. 5, 7:

1. Wartime Reconstruction and the Ends of War.
2. Andrew Johnson, the Radicals, and the Second American Revolution.
Reading: Foner, intro and chs. 1-4; Prince, ed., *Radical Reconstruction*, intro and documents; Gienapp, part 2, 293-316.

Week 12, Nov. 12, 14:

1. Retreat from Reconstruction, the Grant Era and Paths to "Southern Redemption."
2. The "End" of Reconstruction, 1877? 1883? 1965? 2024? and its Legacies to Our Own Time.
Reading: Foner, chs. 5-10; Gienapp, part 3, 317-376.

Week 13, Nov. 19, 21:

1. Authoritarianism or Democracy, or Many Stages in Between: What is Happening Here?
2. Politics or Culture, Culture War or Political Contest? Who are "we" in wake of Election?
Reading: Sunstein, ed., read most of the remaining essays; *two chs. from James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity*, 2024; *W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Mild Suggestion," 1912; *James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 1961.

Week 14, Dec. 3, 5:

1. "It Can't Happen Here": Sinclair Lewis's Enduring Challenge through Stages of American History.
2. Lincoln, Lewis and All of That: moral and Constitutional rot, the allure of strong men, fantasies of violence, irreconcilable polarization, houses divided. Reading: Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*; **Project 2025*, introduction and selected chapters; *two poems by James Weldon Johnson, "Fifty Years," 1913, and "St Peter Relates an Incident at the Resurrection," 1926.

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