

# HUMANITIES 4530/5541

## History and the Future

Fall 2023  
Wed. 9:00–11:50am  
Rm 1410

### INSTRUCTOR

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Office hours: Wed. 4:30–6:00pm and by appointment

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Living, as we do, at a time when major economic and political changes occur with startling frequency, students may naturally wonder what the study of history can contribute to understanding the world around them. This course addresses such concerns by addressing perennial questions that have been asked about the study of history: What kinds of lessons can we learn from history? Can our knowledge of the past help us to predict the future? Does history have a logic or a meaning? What is the value of history for life, anyway? The topics and assigned readings in this course investigate the history of asking and answering such questions, while at the same time considering, in practical terms, how one might go about using the past to prepare for the future. The course adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that draws from history, philosophy, political science, sociology, economics, grand strategy, psychology, physics, and science fiction.

The course will be conducted in seminar format. There are no formal lectures, though the instructor will begin class meetings with a context-setting introduction. Students will be responsible for analyzing and debating the assigned readings through group discussion, guided by the instructor.

Both UG and PG students are eligible to enroll in the course. The course designation is HUMA 4530 for UG students and HUMA 5541 for PG students. While all students will meet together, the assessments and grading expectations for UG and PG students differ.

### Intended Learning Outcomes:

1. Understand canonical arguments about the value of history
2. Gain competence in reading theoretical and philosophical texts
3. Write a well-organized exegetical paper
4. Possess the confidence to tackle a research topic
5. Develop proficiency in oral debate and discussion of texts

## UG ASSESSMENTS

1. Participation: 15%
  - Students will be assessed on their willingness to participate and engage in group discussion. Participation can take the form of making a comment, asking a question, or responding to other students.
  - Attendance is mandatory. Repeated absences will lead to sharp reduction in the participation score.
  
2. 2 Quizzes (Oct. 18 and Nov. 22): 20%
  - Two quizzes will be given for UG students during the final 25 minutes of class. Each is worth 10% of the total course grade. Both quizzes test students' comprehension of the course reading.
  - Quiz #1 will assess the readings from weeks 2 through 6. Quiz #2 will assess the readings from weeks 7 through 12.
  - The quizzes will contain multiple-choice and short-answer questions.
  
3. Midterm paper (due Nov. 5): 30%
  - Students will write a paper that addresses the questions: "Can we learn from the past? Is it possible to predict the future?" The paper must answer these questions by engaging with the arguments presented in part I of the course.
  - The paper must fill 5 double-spaced pages formatted in Times New Roman 12 pt. font with 1 inch margins.
  
4. Research paper (due Dec. 7): 35%
  - Students will be required to choose an issue of contemporary social or political relevance and investigate how the study of the past can—or cannot—help us to understand its potential outcome.
  - Papers must discuss how the issues and strategies discussed in the course readings are relevant for answering the research question.
  - The paper must fill 7 double-spaced pages formatted in Times New Roman 12 pt. font with 1 inch margins.

## PG ASSESSMENTS

1. Participation: 15%
  - Students will be assessed on their willingness to participate and engage in group discussion. Participation can take the form of making a comment, asking a question, or responding to other students.
  - Attendance is mandatory. Repeated absences will lead to sharp reduction in the participation score.
  
2. Presentation: 15%
  - Students are required to make one short presentation, possibly in a group setting (depending on final enrollment figures), about a single week's assigned readings. Each student's contribution should last no more than 10 minutes. Presenters should

assume that everyone has done the reading; detailed summary or recapitulation of facts is unnecessary. Presentations should focus on providing an overview of the argument of the text(s) in question, ideally comparing and contrasting with other readings from the course. PowerPoint presentations are welcome but not required.

- Presentations will be assigned after the end of add/drop period.
3. Midterm paper (due Nov. 1): 30%
    - Students will write a paper that addresses the questions: “Can we learn from the past? Is it possible to predict the future?” The paper must answer these questions by engaging with the arguments presented in part I of the course.
    - The paper must fill 5 double-spaced pages formatted in Times New Roman 12 pt. font with 1 inch margins.
  4. Research paper (due Dec. 7): 40%
    - Students will be required to choose an issue of contemporary social or political relevance and investigate how the study of the past can—or cannot—help us to understand its potential outcome.
    - Papers must discuss how the issues and strategies discussed in the course readings are relevant for answering the research question.
    - The paper must fill 12 double-spaced pages formatted in Times New Roman 12 pt. font with 1 inch margins.

### ASSIGNED READINGS

All readings are available as PDFs on the course’s Canvas website. Students are highly encouraged to print out the readings to facilitate annotation and careful study. Swiping through longer texts on a computer screen, tablet, or phone is not conducive to close reading or remembering.

### EXPECTATIONS

Students who are forced to miss an assessment due to illness or other emergency must provide a doctor’s note or equivalent; otherwise a make-up quiz or extension cannot be arranged. Without a legitimate excuse, late assignments will be docked 5 points (out of a total 100) per day they are late.

The internet is a wonderful resource; it contains an endless amount of information. Some of it is accurate. Much of it is dubious. A lot is plain wrong. Most of it will be *irrelevant* for the purposes of this class. Looking things up on the web can be at most a supplement to—but not a substitute for—attending the course meetings and doing the readings.

This course enforces a zero-tolerance policy on cheating and plagiarism. If a student is found to have cheated on an exam or committed plagiarism on a paper, the case will be immediately referred to the head of the Humanities Division for further investigation. The

use of ChatGPT or other AI-assisted tools is not permitted. Violations of this policy will be treated as incidents of cheating or plagiarism.

## COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1: Introduction (Sept. 6)

*There are no assigned readings for the first class meeting. We will review the syllabus and answer questions about the course content and expectations.*

### Part I: Past and Future

The first part of the course introduces a series of questions about our ability to learn from the past and predict the future.

Week 2: Naturalism (Sept. 13)

*Are there regularities in human affairs that enable us to learn from the past or make predictions about the future?*

- Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 3–49 [§1.1–1.88], pp. 194–201 (§3.70–3.85), pp. 350–57 [§5.84–5.116].

Week 3: Analogies (Sept. 20)

*Is it wise to make decisions based on the assumption that present predicaments resemble past ones?*

- Han Feizi, “The Five Vermin,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 1–14, 97–118.
- Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 1–16, 34–57, 75–90.

Week 4: Indeterminacy (Sept. 27)

*Is there something about social or political processes that makes them inherently resistant to prediction?*

- James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 1987), pp. 1–31.
- Timur Kuran, “The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises,” *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (1995): 1528–51.

Week 5: Intelligibility (Oct. 4)

*Does history have a meaning or purpose that reason can understand?*

- G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), pp. vii–xiii, 3–35.
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 469–500.

Week 6: Models (Oct. 11)

*What makes the social sciences different from the natural sciences?*

- Max Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy," in *Collected Methodological Writings*, ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 100–138.

Week 7: Judgment (Oct. 18)

*How reliable is our judgment when it comes to making predictions about the future?*

- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 3–30, 85–88, 199–265.

Week 8: Prudence (Oct. 25)

*Is it possible for forecasters to beat the odds?*

- Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Broadway Books, 2015), chapters 1–6, appendix.

Part II: Case Studies

The second part examines several concrete cases in which people have attempted to either learn from the past or predict the future. We will examine these cases critically and try to ascertain which strategies, if any, might enable us to make prudential decisions—and what pitfalls lie in the way of reasoning from the past. Finally, we consider the capacity of imaginative writers to anticipate the future. What can we learn from the congruencies or disjunctions between these past visions of the future and our contemporary realities?

Week 9: The Future of Growth (Nov. 1)

*Is the age of disruptive technological transformation behind us?*

- Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro, eds., *The Fabulous Future? America and the World in 2040* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), pp. xv–xxix, 5–21.
- Joel Mokyr, "The Next Age of Invention," *City Journal* (Winter 2014): 12–20.

Week 10: The Thucydides Trap (Nov. 8)

*Can we predict the likelihood of war between great powers?*

- Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.
- Steve Chan, "More Than One Trap: Problematic Interpretations and Overlooked Lessons from Thucydides," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2019): 11–24.

Week 11: Futures Past (Nov. 15)

*What can we learn from past visions of the future?*

- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper, 1932), entire.

Part III: Conclusion

The course concludes with some philosophical reflections about the relationship between historical knowledge and human values.

Week 12: Novelty (Nov. 22)

*Do historical analogies prevent us from appreciating the emergence of truly novel phenomena?*

- Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), pp. 232–47.
- Peter Baehr, "Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Critique of Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 6 (2002): 804–31.

Week 13: Vitality (Nov. 29)

*Does our preoccupation with the past prevent us from living in the present?*

- Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 59–123.