

# **Technology and American Identity**

Columbia University. HIST W 4581. Fall 2003

Monday 9:00-10:50. 302 Fayerweather.

Prof. Zachary M. Schrag

[www.schrag.info](http://www.schrag.info)

*Updated August 20, 2003*

Since the creation of the United States, Americans have used technology not only to solve problems, make money, and have fun, but also to define themselves as individuals, as groups, and as a nation. This course will explore the relationship between tools and identity, using a broad definition of identity that includes questions of nation, region, labor, class, gender, and consumption. In doing so, it will also introduce students to some of the key methods, sources, and ideas used by historians of technology.

## **Requirements**

*Participation and Reading Responses (30 percent).*

Students are expected to be in their seats and ready to take notes at the start of class, and to participate actively in class discussions.

For each of the nine weeks in which reading is assigned, students will write one-page answers to questions that will be provided. These must be sent by e-mail by 5 pm on the Friday before class. Students may skip one of these assignments without penalty.

*First Essay (10 percent).*

Students are asked to find a document created in the United States prior to 1900 that in some way illustrates the relationship between Americans and technology. At the start of class on week 3, they will submit a paper of 750-1250 words (roughly 3-5 pages) describing the document and explaining what we can learn from it. The paper should take the form of an analytic essay, with a clear and bold thesis statement, supported by evidence organized into paragraphs with topic sentences that relate to the thesis.

*Research Paper*

The major assignment of this course is an original research paper of 3750-5000 words (roughly 15-20 pages) exploring the relationship between Americans and a specific technology. The paper need not focus on the question of identity per se, but it must present an interpretive account of human thought and behavior, not simply a factual listing of technical specifications. In other words, it must examine technology in its political, economic, social, or cultural context. The paper must be based on primary sources, though students are free to supplement those sources with factual information and interpretations from the course readings or other secondary sources.

Students should begin thinking about the paper at the start of the semester. The paper is due in the following stages:

*Prospectus (not graded).*

A one-page prospectus should identify a topic and a research question.

*Outline and Bibliography (10 percent of course grade)*

The outline should present a thesis statement and at least twenty supporting topic sentences. The annotated bibliography should list the major sources of the paper, the perspective they present, and their contribution to the paper.

*Final Paper (40 percent of course grade)*

The final paper will be judged on the originality and significance of the thesis, the quality of the supporting evidence, and the style with which the argument and evidence are presented.

*Oral Presentation (10 percent of course grade)*

In our last meeting of the class, students will present their most significant findings.

## **Books**

All books have been ordered at Labyrinth Books, except for *American Genesis*, which is out of print. **Please order a copy of *American Genesis* from [Bookfinder.com](http://Bookfinder.com) or some other source during the first week of class.**

Hughes, Thomas Parke. *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970*. 1989. Reissue, Penguin, 1998.

Kline, Ronald R. *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

McCurdy, Howard E. *Space and the American Imagination*. Washington: Smithsonian, 1999.

Mindell, David A. *War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Nye, David E. *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Sandelowski, Margarete. *Devices & Desires: Gender, Technology, and American Nursing*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Smith, Mark M. *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Smith, Merrit Roe, and Leo Marx, eds. *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.

In addition to the books listed above, students will read various scholarly articles, available on Courseworks.

### **Class Schedule**

*September 8. Introduction*

*September 15. Approaches to the Study of Technology*

- Kranzberg, Melvin. "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws.'" *Technology and Culture* 27 (1986): 544-60.
- Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" in *The Whale and the Reactor* (University of Chicago Press, 1986):19-39.
- Smith and Marx, eds., *Does Technology Drive History?*, pages ix-xv, 1-65, 79-113, 217-273

*September 22. Nation*

- Nye, *America as Second Creation*, 1-42, 91-203, 283-302.
- FIRST ESSAY DUE

*September 29. Region*

- Smith, *Mastered by the Clock*

*October 6. War*

- Mindell, *War, Technology and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*.
- PROSPECTUS DUE

*October 13. Invention*

- Hughes, *American Genesis*, 1-183.

*October 20. Production*

- Hughes, *American Genesis*, 184-352.

*October 27. Consumption*

- Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology," in Wiebe E. Bijker, et al., eds., *The*

*Social Construction of Technological Systems* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 261-280.

- Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 1-127, 272-281

*November 3. NO CLASS (ELECTION DAY)*

- OUTLINE AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE BY E-MAIL

*November 10. Labor and Gender*

- Sandelowski, *Devices & Desires*, 1-20, 44-193.

*November 17. Fantasy*

- Eric Schatzberg, "Ideology and Technical Choice: The Decline of the Wooden Airplane in the United States, 1920-1945," *Technology and Culture* 35 (January 1994): 34-69.
- McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 1-107, 139-161, 233-243.

*November 24. Memory*

- **Seminar will meet at 9:30 am at the New-York Historical Society, 2 West 77th Street at Central Park West, for a guided tour of the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture.**
- George Basalla, "Museums and Technological Utopianism," in Ian M.G. Quimby and Polly Anne Earl (eds), *Technological Innovation and the Decorative Arts, Winterthur Conference Report, 1973* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1974), 355-373.

*December 1. Drama*

- Walter Lang, director, *Desk Set* (1957). To be shown and discussed in class. No reading due.

*December 8. Presentations*

- FINAL PAPERS DUE.