Topics in Economic History

ECO-5002, spring 2026

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Course description

This graduate-level course offers an introduction to quantitative economic history, and involves the study of a broad-ranging theme, occasionally drawing on insights from other disciplines such as political science and history. Topics include the impact of shocks on past societies, social conflict, the role of institutions and state-building in economic development, the various effects of wars, and the short- and long-run consequences of enfranchisement and political repression. Much of these topics are intertwined in the lecture and readings.

The course relies on a mix of lectures, student presentations, and replication exercises to foster a practical and participatory learning experience. Through this approach, students gain both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in quantitative economic history research.

Pre-requisites

The course builds on and extends previous and concurrent courses in applied economics in the MSc program. Familiarity with contents of these courses is assumed. It includes a working knowledge of how to apply economic models in context and how to select and use appropriate econometric tools to test the theory. Familiarity with the content of other economic history courses are a plus, but not compulsory. Students should also have working knowledge of statistical packages such as Python, R, and/or Stata.

ECTS credits

Upon successful completion of this course, students will receive 4 ECTS credits.[1]

Course objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- develop an understanding of the history of the field of economic history;
- critically evaluate (primary) sources in the process of assembling a dataset;
- apply economic theory to historical data and devise (or judge) valid empirical strategies.

[1] Following the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), 1 ECTS credit is the equivalent of approximately 25-30 hours of study.

Students should also gain proficiency in:

- making individual and group presentations;
- writing an informative article review (referee report);
- using statistical software for economic history research;
- devising an essay topic supported by an appropriate bibliography.

Course structure

The course is organised in 8 sessions of 3 hours. Each class is devoted to discussion of a particular topic. The first hour of the class will be a lecture led by the instructor. The second hour of the class will be a discussion on the readings led by students. The last hour will be devoted to working on a replication study. Active class participation is vital. It is expected that students will have done all of the readings in advance of the class.

Attendance to all sessions is compulsory. Repeated absences without motive sent prior to the session are penalised (10 % downgrade on the final GPA).

Assessment

There is no final exam. Instead, the grading breakdown is as follows:

In-class presentation	35 %	
In-class discussion	15 %	
Referee report	20 %	} Term paper
Replication report	30 %	

In-class presentation

Students should present a paper like if they were the authors at a conference. Presentation should last no longer than 20 minutes. In general, presentations should contain the main contributions of the paper; a short discussion of the literature; a description of the data and the empirical (identification) strategy; and an overview of the results (and if pertinent a discussion of the plausible mechanisms at stake).

In-class referee report

Students should act as reviewers and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the paper for no more than 10 min. More information will be given during Class 1. Broadly speaking, the discussion should follow the usual guidelines for writing referee report. In particular, it should at least:

- summarise the method and main contribution;
- discuss how the author's findings fit into the existing literature;
- evaluate the range of sources/data used and their pertinence to answer to the research question;
- assess the empirical strategy and its relevance to answer to the research question.

Term Paper

The term paper for this course consists of a referee report and a reproducibility exercise. The objective of this assignment is to familiarise students with the process of evaluating, assessing, and reproducing empirical research in economics.

Students may select a **published paper of their choosing** in quantitative economic history, provided that a replication package is available. We strongly recommend students to search for papers in the Top 5 (AER, QJE, ECTA, JPE, REStud) + AEJ: Applied Economics, EJ, JEEA, and REStat. These papers typically contains a JEL code starting by 'N'.

Students will work in teams of **up to four members**. Team members are expected to collaborate throughout the entire exercise! Priority should be given to papers related to topics discussed in class, although alternative selections is possible.

General guidelines about the term papers are provided below:

- Students will first write a referee report following standard guidelines in the field (see Berk et al. 2017).
- They will then attempt to reproduce the baseline results presented in the paper (computational reproducibility) and implement a series of reproducibility and robustness checks (robustness reproduction).[2]
  - When applicable, students are encouraged to discuss the inclusion of each control variable in the context of omitted variable bias and bad controls. For each variable, assess whether it is a collider (and thus opens a backdoor path) or a necessary control to avoid omitted variable bias. This exercise should be repeated to justify the inclusion or omission of control variables in robustness checks. Students may use Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs) to document and support their discussion. Each report should include a table similar to the one below, summarising the rationale behind each robustness check.
  - Students are also encouraged to produce relevant data visualisations to highlight and interpret their results. This includes, but is not limited to, the use of specification curves to document robustness analyses (Simonsohn et al. 2020).[3]
  - Students are also encouraged to incorporate additional data, when relevant, to conduct supplementary analyses, in particular when the original replication package contains only the final dataset.

Teams must inform the instructors of their selected paper no later than 15 January 2026.

There is no formal page limit for the term paper; however, submissions are expected to be no longer than 20–25 pages, including figures, tables, and references (A4 format, font size 11, margins 2.54 cm, line spacing 1.5). The term paper is due on 16 March 2026.

[2] Students may familiarise themselves with the structure of such reports by consulting existing documents available at `https://i4replication.org/discussion-papers`. Students are free to conduct all reproducibility exercises in the language of their choice (e.g. Julia, Python, R, Stata).

[3] Various options exist to implement specification curves in common programming languages (e.g. in Python: 1; R: 1, 2; and Stata: 1, 2).

The final deliverable must consist of a single PDF document containing both the referee report and the reproducibility report, as well as a link to a replication package providing all relevant data, code, and documentation used in the reproducibility exercise.[4]

Table 3: Example of robustness checks

Nr.	Main outcome in Table 1	Analytical decision	Rationale & Challenge	Choice(s) in Robustness Checks (include also the original analysis choice if that is considered one of the reasonable analytical choices)
1.	(1)	Outcome Variable	The authors use indices for all outcomes. This reduces the problem of MHT and allows to include several dimensions into one measure. Yet, indices can be created in many different ways.	1. Original choice 2. Alter definition of outcome index by including a more comprehensive set of input variables
2.	(1)	Control Variables	Timing of EL4. The endline took place over 5 months. In particular for income, food security, and consumption, the timing of the survey could matter.	1. Original choice 2. Add controls for the month in which the interview took place
3.	(1)	Control Variables	The authors do not use any baseline controls. At baseline, slight imbalance for income.	1. Original choice 2. Add baseline controls for all outcome variables.

Note: Column "Main outcome in Table 1" should include a reference to the main claims (main outcomes) from Table 1 that the numbered item refers to. Column "Analytical decision" captures the part of the analysis the robustness check refers to. Column "Rational & Challenge" captures the reason for the robustness check and which problems of the original paper it tries to address. Column "Choice(s) in Robustness Checks" includes the analytical choices included in the multiverse robustness checks (note that this can be one choice if the original analysis choice is not considered reasonable and only one alternative reasonable choice is included in the robustness checks).

Figure 1: Example of robustness checks

[4] Additional guidance on structuring replication packages is available here and here.

Course Outline

This is a tentative schedule and is subject to change at any time.

Session 1: Introduction

Topic Overview of the course objectives, structure, and requirements. Mapping the landscape of quantitative economic history

Readings

Assigned none

Session 2: Shocks

Topic Historical responses to external shocks with a focus on famine, epidemics, and conflicts

Readings

Assigned none

Session 3: State-building

Topic State-building as a catalyst for economic development

Readings

Assigned Chiovelli, Giorgio et al. (2024). *Bourbon Reforms and State Capacity in the Spanish Empire*. Working paper No. 36. Becker Friedman Institute for Economics

Recommended Chambru, Cédric et al. (2024). 'The Dynamic Consequences of State-Building: Evidence from the French Revolution'. *American Economic Review* 114.11, pp. 3578–3622. DOI: 10.1257/aer.2022011

Additional Besley and Persson (2010), Guardado (2022), Lax-Martinez et al. (2022)

Session 4: Social instability, reforms and regime changes

Topic Focus on actors and policies during unstable and revolutionary periods

Readings

Assigned Jha, Saumitra and Steven Wilkinson (2023). *Revolutionary Contagion*. Stanford GSB Research Paper 4084. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4406390

Recommended Garfias, Francisco and Emily A. Sellars (2022). 'When State Building Backfires: Elite Coordination and Popular Grievance in Rebellion'. *American Journal of Political Science* 66, pp. 977–992. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12611

Additional Besley, Burgess et al. (2022), Spenkuch et al. (2023)

Session 5: The American Civil War

Topic Leverage the American Civil War to study how ideas propagate

Readings

Assigned Petroff, Casey (2023). *The Origins of Women's Political Capital in the Separate Sphere*. Working Paper

Recommended Dippel, Christian and Stephan Heblich (2021). 'Leadership in Social Movements: Evidence from the "Forty-Eighters" in the Civil War'. *American Economic Review* 111.2, pp. 472–505. DOI: 10.1257/aer.20191137

Additional Bazzi et al. (2023), Esposito et al. (2023)

Session 6: Repression in the East

Topic Dig into different forms of repression to study the effect of exposure to violence, famine and spying on short-run individual outcomes and persistence across generations

Readings

Assigned Rozenas, Arturas et al. (2017). 'The Political Legacy of Violence: The Long-Term Impact of Stalin's Repression in Ukraine'. *The Journal of Politics* 79.2, pp. 1147–1161. DOI: 10.1086/692964

Recommended Lichter, Andreas et al. (2021). 'The Long-Term Costs of Government Surveillance: Insights from Stasi Spying in East Germany'. *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19.2, pp. 741–789. DOI: 10.1093/jeea/jvaa009

Additional Kapelko and Markevich (2014), Miho et al. (2024), Nikolova et al. (2022)

Session 7: World Wars

Topic Explore the impact of World War I and World War II on women and families

Readings

Assigned Arnsbarger, Madison (2024). *The Political Economy of Women's Suffrage and World War I*. Working Paper

Recommended Gay, Victor (2023). 'The Intergenerational Transmission of World War I on Female Labour'. *The Economic Journal* 133.654, pp. 2303–2333. DOI: 10.1093/ej/uead029

Additional Brainerd (2017), Gay and Boehnke (2021)

Session 8: Enfranchisement

Topic Study the consequences of obtaining the right to vote in the private and political spheres

Readings

Assigned Degrave, Anne et al. (2024). *Peasants into Citizens: Suffrage Expansion and Mass Politics in France*. Working Paper No 24. TSE Working Paper

Recommended Facchini, Giovanni et al. (2020). *The Franchise, Policing, and Race: Evidence from Arrests Data and the Voting Rights Act*. Working Paper No 27463. National Bureau of Economic Research. DOI: 10.3386/w27463

Additional Biavaschi and Facchini (2020), Kose et al. (2021)

References

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Bazzi, Samuel, Andreas Ferrara, Martin Fiszbein, Thomas P. Pearson and Patrick A. Testa (2023). *The Confederate Diaspora*. Working Paper No 31331. National Bureau of Economic Research. DOI: 10.3386/w31331.

Berk, Jonathan B., R. Harvey Campbell and David Hirshleifer (2017). 'How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process'. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31.1, pp. 231–244. DOI: 10.1257/jep.31.1.231.

Besley, Timothy, Robin Burgess, Adnan Khan and Guo Xu (2022). 'Bureaucracy and Development'. *Annual Review of Economics* 14, pp. 397–424. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-economics-080521-011950.

Besley, Timothy and Torsten Persson (2010). 'State Capacity, Conflict, and Development'. *Econometrica* 78.1, pp. 1–34. DOI: 10.3982/ECTA8073.

Biavaschi, Costanza and Giovanni Facchini (2020). *Immigrant Franchise and Immigration Policy: Evidence from the Progressive Era*. CEPR Discussion Paper No 14684. Centre for Economic Policy Research.

Brainerd, Elizabeth (2017). 'The Lasting Effect of Sex Ratio Imbalance on Marriage and Family: Evidence from World War II in Russia'. *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 99.2, pp. 229–242. DOI: 10.1162/REST_a_00649.

Chambru, Cédric, Emeric Henry and Benjamin Marx (2024). 'The Dynamic Consequences of State-Building: Evidence from the French Revolution'. *American Economic Review* 114.11, pp. 3578–3622. DOI: 10.1257/aer.2022011.

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Guardado, Jenny (2022). 'Hierarchical Oversight and the Value of Public Office: Evidence from Colonial Peru'. *The Journal of Politics* 84, pp. 1353–1369. DOI: 10.1086/717757.

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Kapelko, Natalia and Andrei Markevich (2014). *The Political Legacy of the Gulag Archipelago*. Working Paper. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.2516635.

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Simonsohn, Uri, Joseph P. Simmons and Leif D. Nelson (2020). 'Specification Curve Analysis'. *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, pp. 1208–1214. DOI: 10.1038/s41562-020-0912-z.

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