

Economic History Reading Group
Spring 2026
Syllabus – January 26, 2026

Time: Wednesdays: **08:30am-10:00am**

Location: L7, P043

Instructors: Philipp Ager and Jochen Streb

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Course Description

This reading group is for Ph.D. candidates and advanced master students with an interest in economic history. We will discuss recent research papers concerning relevant topics in economic history, demography, labor economics, innovation and technological change. Some of the papers will cover tools and advances in methods that are useful for economic historians and economists in conducting empirical research. Examples are applications of machine learning to digitize data, automatized linking, or the use of GIS methods. You will learn what to consider when writing your own job market paper or Master's thesis.

Guidelines

The aim of this course is to understand the issues and methods of research in economic history on the basis of current discussion papers and thereby gain inspiration and guidance for your own research projects. You will be required to discuss a paper from the course list below in detail and write an essay.

All course participants will present a current discussion paper in detail and discuss its strengths and weaknesses with the class. Students are not required to simply summarize the research project. Instead, the students are asked to go into depth and critically analyze the project based on the following key questions. The following key questions will help you structure your presentation.

1. **What is the research question?** Answering this question is not just about identifying the research question (or the starting hypothesis). Rather, it is about contextualizing the research project within the current state of research. Has the state of research been correctly identified and assessed? What are the current gaps in research and what is this project doing to close these gaps? It should also be discussed whether and why the answer to the research question is interesting for a broader audience. Is the project, for example, motivated by current (economic) political discourse?
2. **Which method is used to answer the research question?** Here too, of course, it is not simply a matter of naming the research method. Instead, the research method

must be placed in the scientific context. Is the research method suitable for answering the research question? Does the research method reflect the state of the art? Are there alternative approaches? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen research method? Was the method applied correctly? Did the scholars attempt to prove causality?

3. **What is the theoretical basis of the research project?** Is the research project motivated by specific social science models? What theoretical hypotheses underlie the research question? Do theorists agree on the models and hypotheses used in this research project or is there dissent (such as between monetarists and Keynesians)? How is the choice of the underlying theory justified? Does the theory fit the economic-historical question? Is the theoretical background convincing?
4. **Which research data are used?** The empirical basis of economic history research can be qualitative and quantitative data. It is important to subject both types of data to serious source criticism. Who originally collected and provided the data and for what purpose? Is the data used trustworthy and consistent? Are the data quantitatively sufficient and representative? Do the data measure what they should measure? Was the data newly collected or taken from published sources? Is there better data available?
5. **What are the results of the research project?** Have the scientists come to a clear conclusion? Do they confirm or falsify their initial hypothesis? Is the result new and surprising? Has causality been shown? Has the research project improved our understanding of certain economic-historical or theoretical relationships? Has the project led to scientific progress? These are questions about the contribution of the project.
6. **In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the project?** The answer to this question should be based on the previous key questions. What specific mistakes were made? What could have been done better? Formulate constructive criticism. What was done particularly well? What have you learned from this project?
7. **What further research projects are conceivable?** Try to develop ideas on how you could expand the research area discussed here with your own research. Do you know better data? Do you know of a better research method? Is there a better theory or a better historical case study? Would you like to disprove an established hypothesis?

At the end of the course, you will be required to reflect on the content discussed in a short essay (up to three pages).

Grades

Final essay (50%), Chair of Discussion (25%), Class Participation (25%)

Reading List

1 Session 1 (February 11, 2026)

Introductory Class

2 Session 2 (February 18, 2026)

No Class

3 Session 3 (February 25, 2026)

Human Capital I

- (*) Koschnick, J. 2025. Did a feedback mechanism between propositional and prescriptive knowledge create modern growth? Working Paper <https://juliuskoschnick.com/pdf/Feedback%20loop.pdf>

4 Session 4 (March 4, 2026)

Human Capital II

- (*) Zhao, Q. C., 2025. Technological Change and the Market for Books, 1450-1550, Job Market Paper. https://drive.google.com/file/d/18RYvYkm0n8VoaRxgch39_gZCHJ0r2fU1/view

5 Session 5 (March 11, 2026)

Agricultural Mechanization I

- (*) Ruzzante, M. and Sims, C. W. A., 2025. The Originis of the Nitrogen Revolution, Job Market Paper. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4538079

6 Session 6 (March 18, 2026)

Agricultural Mechanization II

- (*) French J., 2024.” Technological Change, Inequality, and Intergenerational Mobility: The Case of Early 20th Century Agriculture. Job Market Paper <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oCoRDSgcXp90PDTDL74FmuragSiYjlzG/view>.

7 Session 7 (March 25, 2026)

Using Names in Historical Research I

- (*) Bazzi S., Fiszbein M., and Gebresilasse M., 2020. Frontier culture: The roots and persistence of “rugged individualism” in the United States. *Econometrica*, 88(6), 2329-2368.

EASTER BREAK

8 Session 8 (April 15, 2026)

Using Names in Historical Research II

- (*) Weigand M., Mohr, C., and Cantoni, D, 2025. Identity and Institutional Change: Evidence from First Names in Germany, 1700–1850. Working Paper https://rationality-and-competi.de/wp-content/uploads/discussion_paper/545.pdf

9 Session 9 (April 22, 2026)

Innovation I

- (*) Hanlon, W.W., 2025. The rise of the engineer: Inventing the professional inventor during the Industrial Revolution. *Economic Journal*, ueaf023.

10 Session 10 (April 29, 2026)

Innovation II

- (*) Creanza, P. P., 2025. Factories of Ideas? Big Business and the Golden Age of American Innovation. Job Market Paper https://pierpaolocreanza.github.io/website/creanza_jmp.pdf

11 Session 11 (May 6, 2026)

Industrial Policy I

- (*) Lane, N., 2025. Manufacturing Revolutions: Industrial Policy and Industrialization in South Korea, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(3), 1683-1741.

12 Session 12 (May 13, 2026)

Industrial Policy II

- (*) Garin, A. and Rothbaum, J. L., 2025. The Long-Run Impacts of Public Industrial Investment on Local Development and Economic Mobility: Evidence from World War II. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(1), 459-520.

13 Session 13 (May 20, 2026)

Great Depression I

- (*) Ettmeier, S., Kriwoluzky, A., Schularick, M., and ter Steege, L., 2025.. Fatal Austerity, Working Paper. https://www.stephanieettmeier.com/_files/ugd/709433_db403fec08dd469caafbf4b7808bddb6.pdf.

14 Session 14 (May 27, 2026)

Great Depression II

- (*) Caprettini, B., Caesmann, M., Voth J., and Yanagizawa-Drott, D., Forthcoming. Going Viral: Protests and Polarization in 1932 Hamburg. *Journal of the European Economic Association*. https://mcaesmann.github.io/research/hamburg/GoingViral_May2025.pdf