

University of Chicago Committee on the History of Culture

Mission Statement

The Committee on the History of Culture is an interdisciplinary group that provides a space of opportunity for highly motivated and independent students doing original, critical work in the humanities and the interpretative wing of the social sciences or -- better yet -- work that problematizes this categorical divide. The program brings together faculty with primary expertise in a variety of signifying practices (literary-linguistic, visual, gestural, and musical-sonoric), historic periods, parts of the globe and theoretical orientations. At the broadest level, our goal is to explore the politics and poetics of knowledge and culture, bringing a cultural studies perspective to bear on the artifacts and historic record of the past, as on contemporary society. Beyond this, we attempt to reflect critically on the historic development of discourse about culture, as well as the cultural significance and political import of discourse about history.

History of the Committee

The Committee on History of Culture was created sometime during the 1930s, at the same time when the Committee on Comparative Literature and the Committee on Analysis of Ideas and Methods were also legislated into existence. The Graduate Faculty of the Humanities Division, organized strongly along specific disciplinary departments, wanted, by this action, to provide for some academic units, which would allow faculty and students to pursue interdisciplinary studies for which less room existed within the departments. The Committee on History of Culture was expected to provide for very specific topics chosen within a cultural context and having a historical dimension. Aside from a common "methods course" for all Committee students, every individual's program was to be tailor-made for its specific needs. A long written examination over some seventy-five books was meant to assure the candidate's competence in the broader subject area of the chosen topic for a scholarly dissertation. The faculty serving this Committee has by tradition rendered its services beyond the departmental obligations and many excellent faculty members have always done so. The number of students was never very large and only those were admitted who submitted clearly formulated plans for their chosen subject. Before the Humanities Division (joined by the Social Science Division) created specific departments during the 1960s for the study of Slavic Languages and Literatures, South Asian culture, Islamic culture, etc., the Committee on History of Culture was the academic home for persons with specific dissertations in such cultural and historical studies. Before topics in film and "popular culture" were welcomed within respective departments, these also were pursued under the aegis of the Committee. It thus has been providing for very individually conceived topics with historical and cultural dimensions and has also served the Humanities Division by being a home for new approaches and subjects.

(From 1964 to 1992, Karl Joachim Weintraub, who wrote the above, served as the chair of the Committee. In the spring of 2001, Professor Weintraub retired, having entered the University of Chicago as a student in 1948 and staying to teach and to serve as Dean of Humanities from 1973 to 1984.)