

University of Georgia
SOCI 6010: Sociological Approaches to Culture
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Some notion of culture (usually religion) was key to the post-Marxian sociological formulations of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and others. And the concepts of ideas, values and norms were key to the mid-20th Century structural functional synthesis of Talcott Parsons and his followers. But in the 1960s and 70s the study of culture fell into disrepute as hopelessly ambiguous and subjective, and unduly oriented towards social stability.

Nevertheless, the study of culture has made a striking come back since the 1980s. It is common to hear about a "cultural turn" in the social sciences referring to the increasing use of the culture concept in empirical study. Indeed the Sociology of Culture is the second largest section of the American Sociological Association, second only to the Section on Sex and Gender.

In this seminar we will try to understand the rising and declining fortunes of the sociological study of culture. We will begin with classical conceptions of culture, from the founding fathers of sociology to structural functionalism and Frankfurt School Marxism. We will follow this by looking at the core arguments and concepts of the sociology of culture and then at some exemplary recent studies. We will end by discussing the research proposals of students in class.

This class will be run as a seminar. Webster's New World College Dictionary provides us with the following definitions.

Seminar. n [Ger < L seminarium: see SEMINARY] 1 a group of supervised students doing research or advanced study, as at a university 2) a course for such a group, or any of its sessions.

Seminal. Adj. [L seminalis < semen] 3 like seed in being a source or a first stage in development; germinal; originative, 4 being the first or earliest of something that is later recognized as having been of primary influence.

While a *survey* class aims to survey the intellectual landscape in any particular discipline, a *seminar* has a different role. A seminar is meant to be seminal. It is meant to provide some basic seeds that will be carried outside of the classroom to flower in graduate student work. We will leave out more sociology of culture than we include, and we will frequently stop and get hung up on the

same dilemmas over and over. This class will not provide you with everything you need to know. Rather it will get your feet wet in grappling with the handful of dilemmas that exist in the sociological study of culture.

In a seminar, the professor is a “supervisor,” not a lecturer or a guide. This seminar will only be as good as the students make it. On the one hand, this requires vigorous participation is expected from all. This participation includes voicing your opinion, and responding to those you disagree with. Simply getting mad and storming out is not helpful. If you disagree with somebody, attempt to set them straight. On the other hand, this requires a degree of professional courtesy and respect. If you tend to talk a lot, make sure it is not to the detriment of others who want to speak. Don't interrupt others. If someone who rarely speaks suddenly wants to voice their opinion, be sure to cede to them.

This class is designed for graduate students of sociology who are already have some knowledge about the social scientific study of culture and have a research project which in some way is relevant to culture. If this description does not fit you, it is your responsibility to gain the basic knowledge you need to thrive in this class. It is not my or anybody else's responsibility to explain basic sociological terms or the history of sociology. If you are concerned about this I would suggest you read the text I use for my undergraduate class: Wendy Griswold. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. 2nd ed. Pine Forge, 2004.

Evaluation

The goal of a seminar is to learn by thinking, discussing and writing about issues of your interest. However, as I need to give you a grade representing your efforts and achievements in this class, there must be some comparable basis for the work students will do.

First, each student will lead class twice during the semester which will be worth a total of forty percent of the final grade. Leading class will have two essential elements. First, the student leading the class will need to send discussion questions by noon the day before class (i.e. Monday noon for a Tuesday class, Wednesday noon for a Thursday class). Second, the student will lead the class by providing a verbal summary of relevant aspects of the reading and making reference to the questions. Any audio visual aids or handouts will be left to the discretion of the class leader. Usually, I will begin the class by giving a brief context for the reading and how it fits into the literature.

Second, each student will write a five page review of one of the six books we will read in the “exemplary studies” section. This paper should follow the pattern of journal book reviews in which there is some summary and contextualization, an outlining of the significance of the work, and a critical engagement and evaluation. You can look at the *American Journal of Sociology* or *Contemporary Sociology* for examples. This will be worth thirty percent of your final grade.

Finally, your final paper will be a research proposal in which you will apply the main concepts of Section II to a cultural phenomena you wish to study (either in fact or fantasy). This proposal will have two components. First, the last four classes will be dedicated to student presentations of these proposals. The students scheduled for that day will need to get a copy of their proposal to the rest of the class the day before. The actual presentation will amount to little more than a brief

introduction that will lead into an open discussion among the class of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. This presentation will count for ten percent of the final grade. It will also serve the student as feedback for producing the final version which will count for 30% of the final grade.

Summary

*Lead class X 2 (15% + 15% = 30%)

-send discussion questions by noon the day before.

-lead the class with section summaries followed by one or two discussion questions.

*5 page critique of reading/class discussion (30%)

*Research Proposal (presentation (10%) & final (30%))

Laptops

You are not allowed to use your laptop during class (except for AV presentations). I fully realize that many students now take their notes in class on their laptop. However, beyond the temptation of checking your e-mail during class, the use of laptops breaks the flow of a seminar. Too often I have had excellent students that do not participate because they have their noses in their laptops trying to transcribe every word of our discussion. The goal of a seminar like this is not to take copious notes but rather to think, discuss and use the ideas we are working with. If you keep a register of your classes in word processing files, you can take this opportunity to develop your skills in jotting down notes and keywords that can be elaborated latter at your computer. In any case, this class has no midterm or final exam in which you will have to reproduce facts and details from class. Rather, you should spend your time working with the ideas in class to get a feel for them to the point that you can work with them in your papers.

Class Schedule

I. Culture and Society

1. First day, expectations, sign-up, and culture concept;
2. Lecture, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Mead
3. Parsons, Talcott, & Edward Shils. . *Towards a General Theory of Action*. New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Publishers. Ch.3
4. Frankfurt School, . Adorno, Theodor W. "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" Adorno and Horkheimer; Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. 2002[1944]. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," pp.39-46 in Spillman

II. Sociology of Culture

5. Griswold, Cultural Diamond, Methodology

A. Meaning, methods and cultural objects

6. Robert Wuthnow. 1987. *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*. Pp.1-65.
7. Ann Swidler. 1995. "Cultural Power and Social Movements," & Geertz, Balinese Cockfight
8. Adena Rosmarin. 1985. *The Power of Genre*. U of Minnesota P. Ch.1

B. Production of culture

9. Baxandall, Michael. 1985. *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Ch.s 1-2
10. Paul Dimaggio 2002. "Market Structure, the Creative Process, and Popular Culture: Toward an Organizational Reinterpretation of Mass-Culture Theory," [packet]
Richard Peterson 2002. "Why 1955: Explaining the Advent of Rock Music" pp.151-177 in Spillman. [packet]

C. Reception of Culture

11. Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. Part II.

12. Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction*. Cambridge: Harvard UP. Ch. 5

13. Jauss, Hans. 1982. Toward and Aesthetic of Reception. U Minnesota P. Ch.1

III. Exemplary Case Studies

(sections to be read will be negotiated among seminar members)

A. Urban Subculture

14 & 15 Rich Lloyd. Neobohemia

16 & 17 James Farrer. Opening Up.

18 & 19 Mario Small. Villa Victoria

B. Politics and Culture

20&21. Philip Smith, Why War

22 & 23. Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics

24&25 Mische, Partisan Publics

IV. Student Presentations

26-30 Critiquing student research proposals