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HIS 724 - 20th Century U.S. Selected Topics
"Politics, Society, and Culture: Innovative Approaches"

This course surveys time-tested and recent work on politics, social change, and culture since the Civil War. As with most of these colloquia, we read books together that exemplify sustained analyses, relevant and revelatory examples, innovative methodologies, and broad significance beyond the boundaries of the studies. We will examine the often fraught yet productive relationships between popular movements, popular culture, and mass media. Though commercial and governmental control of media posed ongoing challenges to an open, democratic culture, media was never singular, and oppositional voices rarely were entirely silenced or censored. Disempowered groups often made creative use of media niches, or they carved their own channels of communication, though most large circulation media operated within “domains of consensus” that muted divisions and marginalized oppositional voices.

Some of the burning questions we will discuss include: Why did the "populism" of the mid-West and West turn from left-leaning anti-corporate agitation to right-leaning opposition to government and secular society? How did progressive women imagine “white slavery” and seek to abolish not simply regulate prostitution? How did African-Americans and liberal white allies confront racism in the North after World War I? How did politicians and insurgents like Huey Long use radio to create new social movements in a time of economic crisis? How did World War II foster both a culture of patriotism among African Americans and a culture of resistance to imperialism abroad and racism at home? What role did television — the "vast cultural wasteland" — play in the making and undoing of McCarthyism? How did civil rights activists adapt their strategies to Cold War culture and to the possibilities of dramatizing racial oppression on a world stage?

The course grew out of my long-running interest in media and journalism history, a subfield that critically examines the historical production of sources that historians often use uncritically. But public culture has been shaped by politicians, activists, corporate leaders, and the millions of Americans whose language, symbols, and actions have shaped and re-shaped the public sphere. So this course treats culture, ideology, and politics from broader vantage points than simply journalism history.

We will read some broad surveys in the history of ideas, several focused monographs on the political, legal, and ideological strategies of social movements, a few studies of ideology and state power, media framing and political discourse. Our central concern will be with how historians have incorporated cultural analysis into their work. Sub-themes include: urban racial and economic inequality; the enforcement of liberal capitalist consensus and the frequent emergence of oppositional movements in a multiracial society stratified by class and gender.

Theoretical points of departure from several disciplines explicitly or implicitly inform this work. So in addition to common readings each student will present a seminal article or essay in the related disciplines of sociology, political science, anthropology, and cultural studies, as historians have taken

methods and concepts from these. (I will come up with a list shortly, but feel free to suggest your own). The keywords cross disciplinary boundaries: “framing” among media, movement, and official actors; elite and oppositional discourses and cultures; conservative, liberal, and radical ideologies; discourses of power in state and society; communities of memory; national and subcultural identity.

Who controls the culture? Is there a common culture to be controlled, or a plurality of cultures in conflict? How have changing technologies and institutional forms, from newspapers to picture magazines and books to radio, television, music and film, opened and/or closed opportunities for popular democratic expression? How have ordinary people received and re-defined state or corporate cultural products? (This is one of the most elusive problems across the disciplines). How has the state advantaged some people and stigmatized others in the name of “the public interest”? Why did populist discourse shift so dramatically from challenging corporate power to challenging the government and a liberal media? How have discourses of rights and obligations, and faith in government as an instrument for collective good, changed since 1900? How did new methodologies of social survey and social science serve to normalize and stigmatize social practices and subcultures?

You will no doubt supply your own formulations of common questions as we read the history and sharpen our analytical (and pedagogical) skills.

Learning Goals:

Upon completion of this course, students will have finely honed their abilities to:

1. Discuss interpretation and evidence in relation to cultural changes that lie at the core of social movements and political transformations.
2. Write crisp focused prose, integrating evidence, argument, and imagination. Reach beyond historiography imagine how this work may shape your teaching, research, or public history.
3. Swiftly absorb content knowledge and theories that help explain major twentieth century political and social changes as reflected in and shaped by cultural actors.
4. Pose and answer synthetic questions that span period and topic (a skill that is essential for comprehensive exams).

Requirements:

Books are listed under each week. I will complete my growing bibliography of articles of an historiographical or interdisciplinary theoretical nature, and students will sign up shortly to introduce the class to interdisciplinary perspectives that complement the readings.

I. Attendance and Participation. Careful reading and preparation as demonstrated in weekly blogs and active participation in class discussions. **50%.**

There is no reading or writing independent of class discussions, so attendance is essential, and you will lose points for any absences beyond one. I ask all of you to stay on-topic, stay high-minded, limit tangential anecdotes, and please don't go negative on a piece of scholarship until we have a fair appreciation of an author's efforts and contributions. Ahem! This is a colloquium, a collaborative enterprise.

Blogs should be on blackboard discussion board three hours before class. The blogs will reflect what you are most eager to discuss, and serve as a springboard for discussion. You need not have finished the book to write a blog. I am not looking for exhaustive summaries or choice quotes from the texts to fill up the word quota. Rather please write around 400 words in your own voice incorporating several observations that mix appreciation and critique. State succinctly your understanding of the author's main ideas and most significant contributions. Then you can get specific. Answer one of the questions supplied by the professor (these will not always be posted well in advance, but look for them on Blackboard). Explore an analytical point that the author makes especially well; or discuss an episode worth incorporating into an undergraduate course or a public history exhibit. And yes, offer a substantive critique of evidence and argument. Is something asserted but not demonstrated? Is something obviously overlooked?

Evaluation: Based on your writing and your speaking, I will convey a cumulative grade every three weeks based on the precision and concreteness of your commentary to readings under review, on your ability to encapsulate the unifying themes and arguments of a work, on your ability to stay on topic and in dialogue with the group, and on your critical understanding of the larger conversations in which these works are situated.

II. Class presentation on supplementary articles of a theoretical or historiographical nature. 10%. I will supply a list which will either be posted or easily accessed. I must impose an absolute time limit of 10 minutes and 5 minutes for question and answer. You should be able to provide a synopsis of even the most elaborate argument or theoretical perspective in this period. Accompany this with a two page synopsis, single spaced at most.

III. Co-facilitation of discussion with the professor. 10%. Read one of our texts with extra care in advance. Pay attention to critical reception and the larger historiography. Pose interpretive questions to the class. Moderate discussion among your peers for 30 minutes.

IV. Final Exam – Synthetic Essay -- 30%: Supply me questions of a broad synthetic nature that you will answer two weeks in advance of the final exam day. Rely upon the assigned readings only. I do this to keep the class well focused and to avoid adding reading to the common texts we will all grapple with. Show me you have gained not only content knowledge but greater facility with the core concepts of political cultural analysis in history, as identified and developed by the authors and supplementary scholarship.

Required Reading and Schedule of Discussion

(Books have been ordered through the bookstore but many available at substantial savings online):

8/25: Kazin, Michael. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.

9/8: Brown, Joshua. *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America*. Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2006.

- 9/15: Rosen, Ruth. *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
- 9/22: Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- 9/29: Boyle, Kevin. *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. New York, N.Y.: Holt Paperbacks, 2005.
- 10/6: Brinkley, Alan. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression*. New York: Vintage, 1983.
- 10/20: Savage, Barbara Dianne. *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- 10/27: Wall, Wendy L. *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- 11/3: Doherty, Thomas. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- 11/10: Lipsitz, George. *A Life In The Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*. Revised edition. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- 11/17: Gitlin, Todd. *Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- 11/24: Cowie, Jefferson R. *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.
- 12/1: Simon, Bryant. *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Final Essay 12-15 pp. Due Monday December 8 in my Office