Emory University

SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

Soc 560; Spring 2006

Wednesday, 6:00-9:00, 206 Tarbutton Hall

Dr. Timothy J. Dowd
231 Tarbutton Hall, Office Phone: 727-6259
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:00-3:00
email: tdowd@emory.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course (1) provides students with a grounding in cultural sociology and (2) prepares students for doing their own cultural research. To facilitate the first objective, we survey major themes and issues in cultural sociology. We begin this survey by considering the sociological approach to culture, which entails answering the following questions: “What is culture and what does it do?” and “How is culture to be studied?” We next turn to seminal issues that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim respectively raised. In particular, we inspect how current scholars (from a variety of theoretical perspectives) approach these seminal issues. Examples of issues that spring from the work of classical sociologists include the following: “Do media messages shape our view of reality? If so, how?” and “How do class and lifestyle intertwine to reproduce inequality?” Finally, we turn to substantive questions that have come to the fore in recent decades, including “How is market activity undergirded by cultural assumptions?” and “How does social context shape the production and consumption of expressive goods?” To facilitate the second objective (i.e., doing research), we give special attention to methods and designs employed in current research, and we heed how theoretical ideas are translated into empirical projects. Thus, by the end of the semester, each student will have a grasp of the field and an understanding of how to do cultural sociology.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course is organized as a seminar, which entails the combination of a fair amount of reading, class discussion, and written assignments. Given this organization, you are expected to attend each class and to participate.

A) Attendance

If you must miss a class, please inform me ahead of time so that we can make arrangements. Note that unexcused absences will negatively affect your final grade.

B) Class Participation and Discussion

Active participation requires adequate preparation. You therefore must read the assigned material before class and develop your own assessment of this material. Such careful preparation will improve the quality of class discussion. Of course, class discussion should be both informed and respectful; moreover, it should be a forum wherein all can raise questions, explore ideas, and express misgivings. Class participation comprises 20% of your final grade.

C) Weekly Memos
You will prepare a 3-page memo for each week's readings (typed and double-spaced). You should regard these memos as ideas in progress rather than as finished products. Use them to digest each week's readings and to respond with questions, criticisms, and new ideas. Please bring your memo to class and submit it at the end of the evening. The weekly memos comprise 25% of your final grade.

D) Final Paper

You will complete a 15-page paper (typed and double-spaced). The paper should deal with some aspect of cultural sociology, yet it should also relate to your own research interests. Consequently, this paper may take a variety of forms. For example, it can be a review of the literature, a research proposal, a practice preliminary examination in culture, or an empirical project. I ask that you discuss your topic with me by March 8 and submit an outline by April 5. The final paper is due on May 10 and comprises 35% of your final grade.

COURSE RESOURCES

As the semester progresses, class materials (e.g., announcements, overheads) will be posted on the Blackboard site for SOC 560.

The assigned readings are drawn from many sources, so there is no textbook. Instead, most of the required readings will be available at Woodruff Library's electronic reserves (click on "Reserves Direct"). Those readings not available at Woodruff will be provided via other means (which will be detailed on the SOC 560 Blackboard site).

Note that the readings for this seminar augment – but do not duplicate – those found in the Sociology of the Arts (SOC 561) and Sociology of Mass Media (SOC 562) graduate seminars. As a result, you may wish to peruse these syllabi for additional readings. Note also that many of the readings listed below are found on the reading list for the preliminary exam in sociology of culture.

If you have any special needs due to learning disabilities, please contact me at the beginning of the semester and we will discuss the necessary arrangements (for additional information, visit the Emory Office of Disability Services website).

COURSE SCHEDULE

(Subject to Revision)

January 25  Introductions

February 1  Sociology and the Study of Culture

Any survey of cultural sociology should begin by addressing a key question: “How are we to conceptualize and study culture?” Three of the readings grapple with this question. Wuthnow provides an historical overview of sociological conceptions of culture. Drawing on media scholarship, Schudson probes the symbolic aspects of culture. Heeding the overlap between sociology and cognitive psychology, DiMaggio explores the implicit properties of culture. The remaining readings provide a chance for reflection and dialogue: Patillo-McCoy shows the sometimes strategic (e.g., “tool kit”) nature of culture, while Swidler highlights how culture can organize action.


**February 8  Class, Ideology, and the Reproduction of Inequality: The Cultural Turn**

Scholars working in the Marxian tradition have long been concerned with the emergence and persistence of inequality. The rise of a cultural approach is a notable development in this tradition. *The German Ideology* provides a nice launching point for our consideration of the cultural turn, especially as Marx linked consciousness with material existence (*i.e.*, class). The remaining works, although not cast in Marxian terms, demonstrate the utility of such a cultural turn. Taking an historical approach, both Beisel and Higginbotham demonstrate the salience of class, especially as it relates to morality and comportment. Laureau shows the salience of class in contemporary settings with regards to parental styles. Finally, Ewick and Silbey should stimulate thinking about the limits of ideology.


**February 15  From Media Domination to Media Framing**

Given their concern with ideology, it is not surprising that certain Marxists turned their attention toward mass media. The members of the early Frankfurt School, for example, stressed the manipulative role of media; Adorno's article offers a notable example of their critique. Subsequent media scholars, however, have stepped back from positions like that of Adorno's. The review by Gamson and colleagues shows how past conceptions of all-powerful media have given way to present conceptions that emphasize such nuanced ideas as framing and filtering. Consistent with such present developments, McCarthy and colleagues demonstrate why news organizations cover certain protests while ignoring others, and Benson and Saguy address how framing of particular issues can vary between nations. Negus documents the (tenuous) dominance of media corporations and how cultural understandings found therein shapes (if not filters) the type of content that they do (and do not) offer to consumers. Finally, the time series analysis and experiments of Iyengar and Kinder, in turn, document how news content can shape public opinion; their results reveal media effects that are subtler than those propounded by Adorno.


**February 22 Status Groups: The Construction of Identity and Exclusion**

A well-known aphorism states that Weber conversed with the ghost of Marx. In “Class, Status, and Party,” for example, Weber posits that status groups are analytically distinct from classes and are theoretically important. The remaining readings bolster Weber’s position. DiMaggio explores how status groups facilitated the historical emergence of an aesthetic classification (e.g., high culture) in the U.S., while Bryson offers evidence that status continues to shape the exclusionary taste of contemporary individuals; note that both readings provide a necessary foundation for next week's topic of cultural capital. Although not framed in Weberian terms, Feagin and Lacy explore how issues of race can (and do) shape exclusion and identity.


**March 1 Class, Status, and Cultural Capital: Reproduction Revisited**

Scholars working in the Weberian tradition have developed the concept of “cultural capital” in order to demonstrate how lifestyle contributes to inequality. Lamont and Lareau offer a classic (and cogent) introduction to cultural capital research. Bourdieu's work – including Distinction – is an important touchstone for this literature. Aschaffenburg and Mass rigorously assess the cultural capital accounts offered by both Bourdieu and DiMaggio. The remaining works enrich, if not critique, cultural capital research in important ways. Erickson examines the importance of cultural capital relative to that of cultural resources, and Holt interrogates the applicability of Bourdieu's theory to American consumers.


March 8 The Rationalization of Work and Economy

Rationalization entails a major theme in Weber's work. One meaning of “rationalization” is that (crudely put) rationales for action are increasingly based on calculable and systematic criteria rather than on mystical or ad hoc criteria. The excerpt from The Protestant Ethic illustrates the theme of rationalization, including the famous “iron cage” passage. Collins nicely locates The Protestant Ethic amidst Weber's oeuvre, and he also offers a generalization of Weber’s argument. Scott considers the impact of religion on contemporary notions of work, while also heeding the role that gender plays. The remaining readings suggest the complexities, if not the limits, of rationalization. Biggart examines a sector of the economy in which individuals react against formal rationality, and Zelizer explores the (unexpected?) connections between commerce and love.


DUE DATE FOR FINAL PAPER TOPICS

March 15 SPRING BREAK (No Class)

March 22 Sources of Solidarity: Classification Boundaries and Rituals

Durkheim's focus on social solidarity culminated in Elementary Forms, wherein he argued that solidarity is enabled by classification boundaries and their attendant symbols and rituals. Karen Field’s introduction reveals the radical nature of Durkheim’s work while providing a succinct overview. Lamont shows the salience of classification boundaries in her comparative study of working men. The remaining pieces extend Durkheim, either implicitly or explicitly, via particular cases. Duneier and Molotch deal with interactional boundaries between strangers, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz document and explain the commemoration of a divisive war, and Killian examines religion and boundaries in contemporary France.


March 29  Construction of Markets and Industries

Classical sociologists emphasized that market activity entails a cultural component (witness The Protestant Ethic). Of late, sociologists and others have embraced this emphasis with a newfound vengeance. Swedberg nicely surveys how scholars have approached markets over the years, including recent sociologists. Toward the end of his survey, Swedberg notes that some have called for analyses that take seriously the interplay between cultural, social, and economic factors. The remaining readings heed such a call. While they address different cases, they all share a common approach. They each illuminate the cultural foundation of market activity via historical studies, thereby casting into bold relief cognitive aspects that were once explicit but later taken for granted.


April 5  The Social Context of Creativity

The creator who toils in isolation is a romantic image that is typically not accurate. Sociologists, as Peterson and Anand detail, often approach creators by stressing the larger context in which such creators are embedded, which includes extended networks of individuals and conventions regarding creation. Each of the remaining articles demonstrates the salience of this context. DeNora and Santoro examine how historical shifts enabled the rise of new categories of creators. The Bielbys and Fine examine constraints that creators face in commercial settings.


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**DUE DATE FOR PAPER OUTLINES**

**April 12  The Content of Expressive Goods: Stability and Change**

The study of content is typically the purview of the humanities, and it is a relatively new endeavor for most of sociology. Not surprisingly, many sociologists draw on the humanities to inform their theorizing and research. For example, Bauman turns to film theory, and Dowd and colleagues make use of music scholarship. Many sociologists also extend the traditional reflection” model of the humanities by employing multivariate and longitudinal analysis; Alexander and Pescosolido *et al.* offer but two examples of this tendency. Howard Becker provides our framework for this week, discussing the respective factors that shape similarity and change in content.


**April 19  The Reception and Consumption of Expressive Goods**

In this final week, we return once again to the “consuming audience.” However, instead of examining how individuals are affected by the content of expressive goods, we will consider how they actively incorporate such goods into their daily existence. Andrea Press discusses the burgeoning literature that focuses on the active consumers and the insights that this literature has yielded. Griswold provides a comprehensive approach to readers in Nigeria, locating them in the nation’s larger “fiction complex.” The remaining readings demonstrate important directions found in the audience literature. Shrum fills a gap in the literature by comparatively examining how the opinion of critics affects audience choices; Shively moves beyond imputation, addressing how and why viewers apprehend John Wayne films; Roscigno and Danaher show how consumption can be a resource for action.


April 26  Conclusions and Discussion

May 10  DUE DATE FOR FINAL PAPERS