

**Sociology 249**  
***Sociology of Culture***  
Thursday 2-4:50, SSPB 2214

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Office hours: Tu. 11-12 and  
by appt.

This course offers a sampling of the major perspectives in the sociology of culture. The field is large and sprawling and imperialist in its ambitions. There is virtually no institution or practice that is considered out of bounds of cultural analysis. Accordingly, I refer to “sampling” rather than “providing an overview” of perspectives. Sociologists of culture differ on what culture is, where it is located, how it should be studied, what relation it bears to structure, agency, interests, and material reality. Still, sociologists of culture—or cultural sociologists, as some prefer now to be called (for reasons that we will discuss)—do tackle an overlapping set of themes, themes that bear on enduring problems of sociological inquiry. How is it that people use culture practically, creatively, and strategically and yet do so in ways that, by and large, reproduce the status quo? When does culture variously constrain, enable, and constitute practical action? If culture is made up of beliefs and values, then are emotions noncultural? What drives cultural change?

My choice of readings reflects several goals: 1) to wrestle with big questions about structure, culture, and practical action in a way that combines theoretical discussion with empirical investigation; 2) to cover some of the material on the sociology of culture preliminary exam list; 3) to show that what seem to be esoteric debates about culture actually have real import for pressing political questions. This means balancing classical texts with contemporary ones, theoretical readings with empirical ones, and explicitly sociological pieces with ones drawn from anthropology, feminist studies, and journalism. In addition, I hope that students will actively use the materials we read to illuminate dynamics in the cases and fields in which they’re most interested, whether law, management, immigration, gender, or social movements. Note that we will not discuss a number of important perspectives and debates in the sociology of culture; among them, the high culture/popular culture divide; production of culture perspectives; news; collective memory; and the sociology of art. If you are interested in these topics, I can suggest some introductory readings.

Course requirements include 1-2 page weekly memos on the assigned readings, to be posted on the class website’s noteboard by 9 am the day class meets; class participation; and one of two options: either a) a 5- page follow-up report on one week’s readings/perspective on culture due on the noteboard within two weeks of the class discussion; or b) a 5-page discussion of how the sociology of culture can be used to grapple with an empirical question that has been tackled mainly within another field, due on or before the last day of class.

*Weekly memos* should do the following:

- 1) Summarize the author’s central argument. Do so in as punchy a fashion as you can. What is the author’s novel claim? What is counterintuitive about it? (Briefly) what evidence does she or he draw on? Don’t spend more than half a page on the summary.
- 2) Address one or some combination of the following questions. a) How does the author conceptualize culture? For example, is it a coherent system or is it fragmented and multiple; is it

objective or subjective; is it material or ideal? b) How does the author theorize the relations between culture and structure? c) How does the author conceptualize the relations between culture and agency? Do people use culture or does it use them? d) What original concept or concepts does the author rely on to capture culture's operation? How useful is the concept or concepts compared to others that we have discussed?

3) Stake a claim or ask a question. How do you want to use this material in our discussion? Do you have an opinion about it? Does it inspire questions that you'd like to put to the rest of us?

*Follow-up reports* should:

- 1) Outline the perspective on culture that was developed in the week's readings. How is it different from other perspectives that we have discussed? Be both specific, drawing on the readings, and general in distinguishing this perspective's assumptions and implications from that of other ones.
- 2) Draw on class memos and your own reading to outline what you see as the chief criticisms of the approach. Be judicious: note criticisms that you believe are more and less superficial.
- 3) How would you either a) integrate the perspective with another perspective to mitigate its shortcomings; or b) design the kind of empirical study that would allow you to test the arguments made by proponents of this approach or test the assumptions on which it depends.

*Possible applications* should:

Show how a perspective or perspectives from the sociology of culture can be used to illuminate a puzzle, recast a central question, or adjudicate a debate in another field of sociology (or, with permission, outside of sociology). For example, sociologists of law debate the value of truth and reconciliation commissions and other forms of transitional justice. How would a perspective rooted in John Meyer's notion of world culture help to explain why such commissions have become so popular and why they might be in some ways risky? The paper should be something like a research proposal, in which you use the sociology of culture to formulate a provocative hunch about an empirical question.

The following books are required and may be purchased from the bookstore:

Sherryl Kleinman, *Opposing Ambitions* (University of Chicago Press)

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Harvard University Press)

Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love* (University of Chicago Press)

Readings marked by an asterisk have been scanned and are available on the course website under the author's name. All other articles are available online via the links provided. Additional readings are listed for those with a special interest in a topic.

***Week One. September 25. What is, and where is, culture?***

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "[The True Clash of Civilizations](#)," *Foreign Policy* 135 (March/April 2003): 62-70

Sherryl Kleinman, *Opposing Ambitions*

***Week Two. October 2. Structuralisms. Culture as Structure.***

\*Ferdinand de Saussure, "Signs and Language" (1916) in Alexander and Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*.

\*Philip Smith, *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez* (2006), chs. 1, 3  
Joan Scott, "[Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference](#)," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 32-50

Additional readings:

Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life* (2004)

Jeffrey Alexander and Philip C. Smith, "[The Discourse of Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies](#)," *Theory and Society* 22: 151-207

**Week Three. October 9. Pragmatist. Culture as Toolkit.**

Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love*, whole book except the conclusion

William H. Sewell, "[A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation](#)," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 1-29.

**Week Four. October 16. Institutionalisms. Culture as Models for Action and Interaction.**

Paul DiMaggio and Walter K. Powell, "[The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields](#)," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 147-160

John Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez, "[World Society and Nation State](#)," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1997): 144-181

Evan Schofer and Ann Hironaka, "The Effects of World Society on Environmental Protection Outcomes," *Social Forces* 84 (1): 25-47.

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/social\\_forces/v084/84.1schofer.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/social_forces/v084/84.1schofer.html)

Additional readings:

Paul DiMaggio and Walter K. Powell, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Univ. Chicago 1991)

Frank Dobbin, "Cultural Models of Organization: The Social Construction of Rational Organizing Principles" in *The Sociology of Culture: Emerging Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Diana Crane (Blackwell, 1994).

Cal Morrill, "[Conflict Management, Honor and Organizational Change](#)," *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (1991): 585-621.

**Week Five. October 23. Marxism. Culture as Ideology.**

\*Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New Left Books, 1971)

\*Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Blackwell, 2001).

\*Ron Lembo, *Thinking Through Television* (Cambridge, 2000), chapter 7

Additional readings:

Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor*

Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis*

**Week Six. October 30. Culture as Capital.**

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, chapters 1 (1-18 and 53-92), 2 (124-5 and 131-68), 3, 4, 7.

Peterson, Richard A., and Roger M. Kern. 1996. "[Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore](#)," *American Sociological Review*. 61(October):900-907.

Danah Boyd, "[\"Viewing American Class Divisions through MySpace and Friendster\"](#) *Apophenia Blog Essay*. June 24, 2007.

Additional readings:

DiMaggio, Paul J. 1982. "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston." *Media, Culture and Society* 4: 33-50, 303-21.

Noah Mark, "Birds of a Feather Sing Together," *Social Forces* 77 (1998): 453-85

Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*

***Week Seven. November 6. Framing. Culture as Rhetorical Strategy.***

\*David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197-217.

David Snow and Daniel C. Cress, "[The Outcomes of Homeless Mobilization: The Influence of Organization, Disruption, Political Mediation, and Framing](#)," *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2000): 1063-1104

\*Francesca Polletta, "Storytelling in Social Movements," in Hank Johnston ed, *Social Movements and Culture* (2008)

\*Francesca Polletta, "Can Progressives Win with a Good Story?" *Contexts* (2008)

***Week Eight. November 13. Culture as Performance and as Ritual***

\*Francesca Polletta, "Toward a Commonsense of Storytelling"

\*Robert Zussman, "Picturing the Self: My Mother's Family Picture Albums," *Contexts* (fall 2006)

\*Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*

***Week Nine. November 20. Culture as Emotion***

\*Jack Katz, "Pissed Off in L.A." in *How Emotions Work* (1999)

\*Martha Nussbaum, "'Secret Sewers of Vice': Disgust, Bodies, and the Law," in Susan Bandes, ed., *The Passions of Law*

Arlie Hochschild, "[Emotion Work, Feeling Rules and Social Structure](#)," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979): 551-575.

Additional readings

Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, ed., *Emotions and Social Movements* (Univ. Chicago, 2001)

Susan Bandes, ed., *The Passions of Law*

Francesca Polletta, "[The Laws of Passion](#)," *Law and Society Review*

Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in A. M. Jaggar & S. R. Bordo, eds., *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (Rutgers, 1989)

***Week Ten. December 4. Next Steps: Hybrids, Wrinkles, and Challenges***

