1 Course introduction; or, culture in sociology, through the thicket

Culture is of pivotal significance to the toolkit of practicing sociologists today, but it was not always that way. While culture seems indisputably significant for social life today, it carried a much different meaning not that long ago and was only marginally significant for sociologists. When it was significant (prior to say 1986), culture was often shoehorned into the well-defined space that Talcott Parsons had given it in his systems theory.

This changed in the 1980s. Not only was a new section founded in the byzantine ASA bureaucracy—the Sociology of Culture—but for once this reflected a genuine conceptual shift in the discipline, as sociology finally took the cultural turn. Since then, culture has become the primary venue (and probably the only venue) in which big theoretical questions are asked that leave some lasting imprint on the rest of the field. This has made culture the de facto domain of theorists, of exciting syntheses and importations, of broad reading, of creative and critical thinking. Though, in some sense, that initial energy could be running out. If the cultural turn marked a paradigm shift (of sorts) in the discipline, then by this point it has settled into a kind of normal science.

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1 This document serves as a general plan for the course and will likely (nay definitely) change throughout the semester. All changes will be announced in class and on the course website
The general theoretical frameworks for culture have been established. They are rarely available to being questioned in an influential way. They are instead used for the purposes of solving empirical puzzles.

There could be another shift in motion, however. Sociology has held firm to “the culture concept” while its sister discipline, anthropology, has left it behind. The culture concept they hold firm to, in large part, commits sociologists to a rather strange and antiquated view of human cognition. The culture concept is often used unreflexively, leaving it vulnerable to abstraction and scholastic distance. Does something like culture really exist? Do groups of people really share it? Is it merely an analytic construct? For all these reasons and more, some of the most exciting (imho) theoretical conversations happening now in the field fall under the large and amorphous umbrella of post-cultural theory that, to unfairly summarize, tries to retain sociology’s concern with meaning and action (sine qua non of cultural sociology) while dropping its commitment to the culture concept.

But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves just yet. In this course, you will learn about culture, where it comes from, where it’s been, how its been used and used well by sociologists, and also where it could be going. There is a relevant distinction to make at this point. All of what I’ve said so far applies mainly to cultural sociology, but this course is entitled the sociology of culture. What gives?

The sociology of culture has not been plagued by similar problems because it does not try to explain things using culture; rather it explains culture using other sociological frames and categories. How did movies come to be considered high art? Why does country music exist? How does a book get published, a movie get made, or a song get produced? These are all questions for the sociology of culture. We’ll read and discuss that branch; but we’ll also read and discuss the other branch too, cultural sociology, which tries to explain bread and butter topics in sociology using culture as a kind of new variable. Can culture help explain poverty, inequality, discrimination, educational outcomes, organizational patterns, or why things like the Salem Witch Trials and French Revolution happened? If so, how? As we will see, using culture to explain these things tends to revolve around the problem of meaningful action.

Culture in sociology is thriving. Witness specialty journals: Poetics, Cultural Sociology, American Journal of Cultural Sociology. Who’s to say for how long this “culture” thing will kick around in the field. Maybe forever. This class will be relevant for you in simply knowing what people say about and, more importantly, how they use it.

You are clearly more concerned with the latter, so what this seminar will try to do for you is something like the following:
2 Learning goals

(1) Introduce you to the thriving (for now) field of cultural sociology/sociology of culture

(2) Help you further your research interests and projects

(3) Help you develop research topics related to (or not) culture and develop novel approaches/points of view on research topics seemingly unrelated to culture (but secretly related to it)

3 Course requirements

(1) Active participation and attendance (at every seminar!)

This means (a) coming prepared (doing “all” the reading) to every class; (b) discussing the readings in class as part of a collective discussion. This active participation expectation holds even when (i) you don’t think you understand the readings; (ii) you hate them; (iii) you are hung over; (iv) you are filled with rage at capitalism and/or at its critics and/or at the state of the world.

Keep in mind that talking (relatively coherently) in front of people about intellectual stuff is (surprise!) a requirement of academics. If you have a seriously hard time doing this I recommend either (1) talking in front of a mirror or (2) watching YouTube clips of Malcolm X for inspiration.

As part of your participation grade, and in lieu of subjecting you to discussion leading, you are required to submit at least two discussion questions to me every week. These are due by Monday at noon. These questions have to be related to the readings for that week, and they should be intelligently stated enough that they show some demonstrable grasp of at least some of the readings for that week. This is important (seriously). We will try to answer these questions during the seminar.

(2) Two in-class presentations

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2 Nice definition of “seminar” provided by Richard Gale, head honcho, Carnegie Academy of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: “Many define seminars by size (between five and twenty) or configuration (a circle around a central table), by focus (the centrality of a shared text) or professorial function (facilitator or conductor). But beneath these aspects is a pedagogy wherein everyone has a voice and each person’s ideas are valued.
One presentation as part of three (or four) person book panel Details TBA
One presentation on a proposed research paper/topic Details TBA

(3) One research proposal (3-5 pages double-spaced)
Details TBA

(4) One research paper (15-20 pages double-spaced)

The gist: I want you to submit a 15-20 page (double-spaced... whew!) paper for the course. However... Keep in mind that the larger goal of this requirement is to help you write a paper that you intend to publish—I don’t want you to look at what you submit as merely a “course paper.” Publishing is an essential part of being an academic.

Perhaps most indicative of this (in sociology and nearly every other field) is the fact that it is quickly becoming necessary to publish as a graduate student even to be considered for a tenure-track job in the discipline.

I want this class to be as helpful for you as possible in this (very important) regard. So, when picking a paper topic, keep in mind this long-term perspective. What you write about is up to you, and I don’t have a hard requirement that it fully engage with the course material, but that it somehow relate to the course content in a way that you believe is fruitful and productive.

Having said that, the paper you submit is not meant to be a final or polished product. It will ultimately be a draft (even the final version you turn in, though keep in mind that it should be a complete paper) that, hopefully, you will continue to work on in the future.

You should be prepared to spend 9 hours a week (outside of class) on this class. The Brandeis administration really wants you to know that.

4. Grading policy

First rule of grad school: grades don’t matter. Someone once said: “The issue of grades should not take a single metaphorical inch of cognitive space in your head.” I pass this advice along to you.
However, your reputation among the faculty does matter—a lot. The easiest way to get a good reputation among the faculty is to do well in seminars (i.e. do the assignments, participate, at least give a performance of caring). Keep this formula in mind when it comes to the grading policy and your participation in this course.

What does this mean for the course requirements? The way that grading will work is if you do well on all course requirements (contribute to class, send in your reaction papers, write a good paper or good working papers) you will get an A. If, on the contrary, you take a vow of silence in class and/or do not submit reaction papers, you will not get an A, regardless of how great your paper is. It should go without saying that talking a lot in class and submitting all of your reaction papers, but not turning in a final paper or not turning in all of your working papers will not get you an A (and in this instance, you will fail the class). The point, basically, is make sure to complete all the required assignments.

For those of you who like the security of numbers, here is the grading rubric:

**Attendance and Participation**
- Book Panel Presentation: 50%
- Research Paper: 25%
- Research Proposal/Presentation: 25%

The more general point to emphasize is that if you make an effort to be a productive member of this class, doing what is asked of you and making the most of your (and my) time over the course of the semester, you will get an A in the class (though that might not actually mean much in the larger scope of things). You should expect to spend, at barest minimum, 9 hours of work (reading, rereading, re-rereading, writing, puzzling) per week on this class.

Three caveats to mention about this: I know the material we deal with in this class may be intimidating for you, and that there is a lot of required reading. I also know the first semester of grad school is extremely busy, time-consuming and often overwhelming. Finally, I don’t expect you to become an expert in social theory by the end of this course. What I do expect is that you to try to make this class as beneficial for your future career as a sociologist as I, and others in the field know that it can be.

I think I’ve organized the course in such a way that satisfying the assignments will not only mean getting an A in the class, but it will also not waste your time because it will involve you doing things that you will otherwise have to do in order to become a
sociologist (I presume this is what you want to be?). Your participation in this course should ultimately be viewed in terms of how it furthers that goal.

4 Required texts (tentative)


Clayton Childress, *Cover to Cover: The Creation, Production and Reception of a Novel* (2017)

5 Other course policies

1. Code of Academic Conduct

All students are responsible for compliance with the Brandeis Student Rights and Responsibilities circa 2018-19. You can access that here: http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srsc/rightsresponsibilities/2017-18%20RR.pdf

Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty.

2. Academic Honesty

Let’s spend a little time with this since you will be writing so much for this class... All of the work you submit for a grade must be your own. Claiming someone else’s work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. Duh. We all know this. Please do not do it. The penalties for this (at the university level) are not good. If I suspect academic dishonesty, you will automatically fail the assignment. If it happens again, you will fail the course.

3. Electric Stuff

Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets and other tech stuff in class
You can use them. If they become a problem, you cannot use them.
Simple, elegant.
4. Disability Statement

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a disability, please contact me as soon as possible. We’ll make any and every accommodation. If you have questions please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services (brodgers@brandeis.edu).

6 Course Schedule [under construction]

Jan 22 - Debating Culture
Kuper
Reed
Small et al
Lizardo

Jan 28 – Classics
Weber (?)
Durkheim (?)
Parsons (?)
Simmel (?)
Marx and Engels (?)
Sausurre
Peirce
Learning to Labor

Feb 4 – Contemporaries
Swidler
Alexander and Smith
Lizardo
Feb 11 - Sociology of Culture
Peterson
Lena
Bourdieu
Something else

Feb 18 -- Midterm break, no class

Feb 25 - Book Week I – Novels
Childress, Cover to Cover

Mar 4 – Landscapes
Barthes
Reed
Alexander
Sewell
Something else

Mar 11 - Distinction(s)
Bourdieu
Lamont and Molnar
Patterson and Fosse

Mar 18 - Book Week II – Power
Mar 25 – Objects
McDonnell

April 1 – Practice
Bourdieu
Boltanski and Thevenot
Biernacki
Talk of Love
Mukerji

April 8 - Book Week III – Pragmatics
Lamont, How Professors Think

April 15 - Post-Culture?
Me
Field Theory
Abend?
Something else

April 22 - Passover, no class

April 29 – Presentations