

Politics and Popular Culture
Political Science 330
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Office Hours: M, T, W, TH 10:30 to 11:30 and by appointment

Introduction

This course presumes that a powerful determinant of political behavior in any society can be found in the way culture shapes an understanding of the nature of human activity. That is, human beings necessarily must develop a way to help the world make sense. Without a framework for such understanding, human action is constantly problematic, human emotion is incomprehensible and social life impossible. To allow humans to establish and maintain satisfying and productive social relations, it is necessary to establish a common set of meanings and patterns of interaction that provide the context in which purposeful and moral action is possible.

These interactions are understood in a normative context. That is, they are characterized by definite but not always explicit values which members of a culture feel in varying degrees obligated to obey. These values are expressed through symbolic communication and manifest in symbolic action whereby members of a society reaffirm and recreate the fundamental commitments and beliefs which characterize the social order. Together, these symbols, commitments, values, meanings, and patterns of interaction shape behavior and prescribe the range of possible human activity within a given society.

Politics is among the behaviors that are shaped by culture. While the power relations which are the most fundamental aspect of politics are grounded in material as well as cultural factors, the experience of politics depends to a large extent on the symbolic context in which the citizen operates. Indeed, any citizen's understanding of his or her place in the political order depends fundamentally on the symbols, myths and rituals that define and express the society's basic political beliefs. Furthermore, the use of symbols for the expression of authority and the mobilization of interests is as fundamental to the operation of any political system as is the use of economic incentive and military coercion. **This is not to say that the political can be reduced to the symbolic. Nor is the cultural an artifact of the arrangement of power relations. Rather, to understand politics, it is necessary to be cognizant of the role of cultural processes in the exercise of power in any society.**

This course contends that political symbolic action extends to popular culture. While ideologies and belief systems are directly inculcated in formal institutions such as schools, corporations, and government, individuals are also exposed to the precepts of specific cultures through popular culture. Television, radio, literature, and movies all include symbolic communications and actions which express current and prevailing ideas, values and social relations in a given society. These expressions often serve to

reinforce the power of the dominant groups in a society but can be sources of innovation, change and even revolution. In an era when human beings in advanced industrial societies increasingly devote time to the consumption of popular culture, it becomes increasingly important to recognize that popular culture supports or challenges existing social organization.

Writing Intensive

This is a writing intensive course. Consequently, it includes assignments that require students to engage in writing as a process, work in multiple drafts, revise written work, complete ungraded writing assignments, write in different genres and produce a certain quantity of written work. As such, the quality of writing will be a significant factor in evaluating all graded assignments.

Books

Paul Cantor, **Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization.** (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001)

John Leland, **The History of Hip.** (Harper Collins, 2005)

Kathryn Montgomery, **Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce and Childhood in the Age of the Internet.** (MIT Press, 2007)

John Street, **Politics and Popular Culture.** (Temple University, 1997)

Lisbet van Zoonen, **Entertaining the Citizen,** (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)

Evaluation of Student's Work

The student's grade will be determined on a 300 point basis through the following assignments:

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|--|------------|
| Research paper final draft | 100 points |
| Annotated bibliography, thesis statement and outline | 30 points |
| Peer editing report | 10 points |
| Entertainment and Citizenship Essay | 50 points |
| Final assignment | 50 points |
| Journal and instructor evaluation | 60 points |

Course Journal

Students will keep a course journal. The journal should have 15 entries – at least one for each week of class from the second to the next to last week including one for each

of the three movies presented in class. Journal entries can be a response to the material assigned for the class in a given week or might require a response to a specific prompt from the instructor. This could entail a summary of the class discussions, the identification of questions raised by the class meeting but not answered, a critical (positive or negative) reflection on the reading or ideas presented in class or **writing in support of any of the graded assignments in the course**. The journals will be collected periodically and returned with comments but **individual entries will not be graded**. The instructor will provide feedback as to the overall quality of the journals and the journals will be assessed for consideration in the instructor evaluation portion of the grade.

Research Paper

Each student will complete a research project regarding the political or ideological content of popular culture. The specific focus of the research will be determined by the student in consultation with the instructor. Research can be done on:

- specific forms of popular culture (e.g. television shows, movies, music)
- issues that have political dimensions that are manifest or “negotiated” in popular culture (e.g. race, gender, religion, war, violence)
- use of popular culture for political actions or goals

The final project will be at least 10 typewritten pages, will be completed using the writing process described below.

This portion of the course will also serve to contribute to Moravian College’s participation in an assessment of writing across the curriculum and *intentional learning* (a student’s ability to learn on his or her own) that is being funded by a grant from the Teagle Foundation. Participation in this grant requires the completion of a set of assignments from initial assignment to “prewriting” through final draft, with earlier drafts and some evidence of response to an earlier draft or drafts, whether that response comes from classmates, Writing Center tutors, or instructors. Students work will be shared with the Moravian College faculty administering the grant but student identities will **not** be known to the assessors, individual work is not being evaluated and that this assessment has **nothing** to do with their grade in this class. Students will also be asked to write letters to the assessors about completed writing project/process.

In completing this assignment, students will be required to submit the following prior to completion of the final draft:

1. **Preliminary statement** identifying topic and explaining what the student anticipates doing
2. **Annotated bibliography** -requires that students provide the bibliographic information on each of their selected sources and a paragraph summarizing the content or significance of the source.
3. **Thesis statement and outline** -This requires a clear statement of the principal thesis of the paper and a good topic outline for the entire paper. The quality of the

outline will be judged on how easy it would be for the writer to construct the paper with only the outline in front of him or her. **Single page outlines** will be ineligible for full credit.

4. **Rough draft for peer editing**
5. **Peer editing report** -The peer editing report will be a written statement of the principal comments developed by the peer editor for the writer. The peer editor will be expected to share those comments with the writer but a copy of the written comments will be submitted to the instructor as well. ***KEEP IN MIND THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PEER EDITOR IS TO HELP THE WRITER PRODUCE THE BEST PAPER THEY CAN, NOT TO TRY TO DEMONSTRATE HIS OR HER OWN SKILL OR COMPETENCE.*** The instructor reserves the right to discuss the peer editors written comments with the writer.

Due dates

- 1/22 A preliminary statement identifying topic and explaining what the student anticipates doing
- 2/5 A statement of the student's plan's for the research paper including:
- A preliminary thesis
 - The types of sources to be used
 - Thoughts about the form or genre to be used (analytical, narrative, persuasive, descriptive)
 - A calendar for completion of the project
- 3/13 Annotated bibliography, thesis statement and outline of the paper
- 3/25 **Politics, Entertainment and Citizenship Essay**
- 4/3 A rough draft for peer editing
- 4/8 Peer editing report
- 4/17 **Final draft**
- Final exam date: final assignment**

Politics, Entertainment and Citizenship Essay

In the contemporary culture, the line between politics and entertainment has become a significant matter of discussion. The role of politics as a form of popular entertainment is not a new phenomena and clearly 19th Century partisan political activities often served as a form of public entertainment. The advent of radio, television and other electronic media, however, has reconfigured how political messages are distributed and, increasingly, there have arisen concerns that these media have diminished the quality of public discourse and the meaningfulness of democratic citizenship. Using course materials assigned between 2/26 and 3/18, discuss your response to course materials to indicate the degree to which television and popular culture have impacted the quality of political discourse and democratic citizenship.

This essay should be 5 pages typewritten and demonstrate evidence of engagement with the readings by concrete reference to these materials. Use of outside materials to

strengthen the essay is welcome but not required. Students can also use Ch. 7 in **Generation Digital** as well. All references to the course texts or any outside sources must be appropriately cited.

Final Assignment

Students will complete one of the two final assignments. The assignment to be completed is the student's choice and will be handed in on the day the final exam is scheduled.

Globalization Essay

One of the most significant developments of the past thirty five years is the process of globalization. In this process, not only have global markets arisen but the spread of western popular culture has been a major factor in shaping international relations, political conflict and economic transformation. In this course, there are several readings that address these issues including **Gilligan Unbound** and the reading assigned for April 3 and 8. Using these materials, write a persuasive essay in response to the following prompt: *The globalization of American popular culture represents a significant advance in the development of the human experience around the globe.*

This essay should be 3 pages typewritten and demonstrate evidence of engagement with the readings by concrete reference to these materials. Use of outside materials to strengthen the essay is welcome but not required. All references to the course texts or any outside sources must be appropriately cited.

Time Line

Using the materials in the **History of Hip**, create a time line of the 10 most important moments, events or developments in the development of "hip" subcultures. Not more than two entries should come from any one chapter. In presenting an entry, identify the event or development and provide at least one good paragraph explaining why the entry represents an important moment or development. After the 10 entries have been presented, write a brief commentary (3 to 5) paragraphs discussing the most important thing you think you have learned from the book.

Course Outline Class Schedule and Reading

- I. Introduction (1/15)
- II. Culture and Politics
 - A. Structure, culture and power relations (1/17)
 1. What is politics?
 2. High vs. popular culture

Read: Street, Ch. 1; van Zoonen, Ch. 1

B. The nature of culture (1/22-1/24-1/29)

1. Social construction of meaning
2. Dialectical interpretation of experience

Read: Street, Ch. 7

3. Cultural forms: symbols, language, discourse and narratives (culture as text)

Read: van Zoonen, Ch. 2

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1/31)

C. Functions of culture (2/5)

1. Production, reproduction, agency and power
2. Political functions of culture

Read: Street, Ch. 2; van Zoonen, Ch. 7

D. Popular culture and behavior (2/7)

1. Culture and causality
2. Social psychology and culture: roles, norms, modeling, and behavioral repertoires

III. Entertainment, Ideology and Political Discourse

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (2/12-2/14)

A. Popular culture and ideology

1. Popular culture and world view (2/19-2/21)

Read: Cantor, **entire**; Street, Ch. 8

B. Popular culture and citizenship (2/26-2/28)

Read: Street, Ch. 3; van Zoonen, Ch. 4; Postman, **Amusing Ourselves to Death**, pp. 3-80, **ON RESERVE**

C. Postmodernism and political engagement (3/11-3/13)

Read: Purdy, **For Common Things**, pp. 9-76, **ON RESERVE**

Run Lola Run (3/13)

IV. Popular culture in politics (3/18)

- A. The state and popular culture
- B. Political uses of popular culture

Read: Street, Ch. 5; van Zoonen, Ch. 5 and 6

V. Popular Culture and Social Change

- A. Ideology and the structure of social change (3/25)
- B. Oppositional ideology and popular culture (3/27-4/1)

Read: Leland, **entire**

C. Globalization and democracy (4/3 and 4/8)

Read: Street, Ch. 4; Barber, “**Jihad v McWorld**,” **Atlantic Monthly**, March 1992, **ON RESERVE** and available on line at :

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199203/barber>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics//foreign/barberf.htm>

VI. Cyberculture

A. Identity (4/10)

Read: Montgomery, Ch. 1 and 2

B. Consumption (4/15)

Read: Montgomery, Ch. 4 and 5

C. Social networking and political activism (4/17)

Read: Montgomery, Ch. 6 and 7

D. Censorship (4/22)

Read: Montgomery, Ch. 3

