

Politics and Popular Culture
Political Science 330
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Office Hours: M, W, Th 1:00-2:00 and by appointment

Introduction

This course presumes that a powerful determinant of political behavior in any society is the way culture shapes 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 which make purposeful and moral action possible.

These interactions are to be 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 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 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, narratives 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 political culture through popular culture. Television, radio, literature, movies and the internet all include symbolic communications and actions which express current and prevailing ideas, values and social relations. These expressions often serve to reinforce the power of the dominant groups in a society but can be sources of innovation and change. 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)

Barbara Ehrenreich, **Bright Sided.** (Metropolitan Books, 2009)

Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson, **Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era.** (NYU Press, 2009)

Andrew Keen, **The Cult of the Amateur.** (Doubleday, 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:

Course Journal	50 points
Quizzes	25 points
Annotated bibliography	40 points
Thesis statement and outline	20 points
Research paper final draft	100 points
Entertainment and Citizenship Essay	50 points
Instructor evaluation	15 points

Course Journal

Students will keep a course journal. The journal should have **at least** 10 entries from 10 different weeks of the semester. More entries can be provided if desired by the student. Journal entries might be required responses to specific prompts given by the instructor but, in the absence of such prompts, the entries can be a response to the material assigned for a class in a given week or other material relevant to the subject

matter of the course. 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 graded assignments in the course**. The journal entries are to be submitted electronically and comments and feedback will be provided periodically but **individual entries will not be graded**.

Grading of the journal will be based on the following criteria:

- The quality of the observations, insights or questions presented in a given journal entry
- The degree to which the entry incorporates material from the course or applies concepts or ideas from the course to materials that do not derive from the course
- The clarity and effectiveness of the writing

Quizzes

At four points in the semester, students will be asked to write for fifteen minutes in response to a prompt about a specific book or assigned reading. The prompts will be provided the class before the quiz is taken and are intended to demonstrate that the reading has been completed. The quizzes will be pass/fail. If a student passes all four quizzes, they will earn 25 points. If they pass three of the four quizzes, students will earn 20 points. If they pass fewer than three quizzes, the students will earn zero points. The readings on which the quizzes will be given and the date of the quiz is listed below:

Barbara Ehrenreich, **Bright Sided** **Quiz date: 2/16**

Paul Cantor, **Gilligan Unbound** **Quiz date: 3/2**

Andrew Keen, **The Cult of the Amateur** **Quiz date: 3/18**

Benjamin Barber, **“Jihad v McWorld,”** **Quiz date: 4/20**

Research Paper

Each student will complete a research project regarding the political or ideological content of some element 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. In completing this assignment, students will be required to submit the following prior to completion of the final draft which will be **due on 4/22**:

1. **Preliminary statement** identifying topic and explaining what the student anticipates doing **DUE: 2/9**
2. **Annotated bibliography** that provides the bibliographic information on each of their selected sources and one or two paragraphs summarizing the content of the source and describing why the source appears to be useful or was chosen. There should be at least 12 entries in the annotated bibliography. At least three of the sources must come from the “free” web, at least three must come from the “fee” web and at least three must be books or other printed material. **Due 2/25**
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. **Due 3/16**
4. **Rough draft** for peer editing Students will be expected to submit their paper to a peer editor. The peer editor need not be a student in the class. The rough draft can be taken to the Writing Center. The student writing the paper will be responsible for submitting a 1 to 2 page statement identifying the best advice he or she received from the peer editor and what changes the writer made in response to the comments of the peer editor. **Due 3/30**

Politics, Entertainment and Citizenship Essay

In the contemporary culture, the line between politics and entertainment is a significant matter of discussion. The role of politics as a form of popular entertainment is not a new phenomena but the advent of radio, television and other electronic media has reconfigured how political messages are distributed and, increasingly, concerns have arisen that these media have diminished the quality of public discourse and the meaningfulness of democratic citizenship. Using course materials, discuss how popular culture has impacted the quality of political discourse and democratic citizenship. This essay should be 4 to 6 pages typewritten and demonstrate evidence of engagement with the readings by concrete reference to these materials. These references can be to any of the readings for the course but must include material from John Street, **Politics and Popular Culture** and Lisbet van Zoonen, **Entertaining the Citizen**. Use of outside materials to strengthen the essay is welcome but not required. This assignment will be due on whatever date is scheduled for the final exam.

Instructor Evaluation

Each student will be evaluated by the instructor for his or her participation, involvement in and contributions to the course. This portion of the grade will reflect all activities in the course that are not otherwise specified in the syllabus including attendance and participation in class discussion. It will also include the oral presentation of the research projects which will be scheduled for the last week of the semester.

Class assignments

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1/19	Introduction
1/21	Structure, culture and power relations Read: Street, Ch. 1 van Zoonen, Ch. 1
1/26	Culture and the social construction of meaning Read: Street, Ch. 7
1/28	<u>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</u>
2/2	Discourse, language and symbolic action Read: van Zoonen, Ch. 2, 6 and 7; Gray, et. al., Ch. 11
2/4-2/9	Functions of culture Read: Street, Ch. 2 and 8
2/11	Culture and Behavior
2/16	Culture and Behavior continued Read: <u>Bright Sided</u> , entire
2/18	<u>Run Lola Run</u>
2/23	Postmodernism and political engagement
2/25	Popular culture and democratic citizenship Read: van Zoonen, Ch. 4 and 8
3/2	Politics and entertainment as ideology Read: <u>Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization</u> , entire
3/4	Politics and entertainment as ideology continued
3/16	Political uses of popular culture Read: Street, Ch. 3; van Zoonen, Ch. 5
3/18	Cyberculture, authority, expertise and democratic discourse Read: <u>The Cult of the Amateur</u> , entire; Gray, et. al., Ch. 9
3/23	Cyberculture, freedom of expression and public morality
3/25	Cyberculture, identity and privacy

- 3/30 Popular culture and social change
Read: Gray, et. al., Ch. 1 and 10
- 4/6 Satire and Political discourse
Read: Gray, et. al., Ch. 4, 5 and 6
- 4/8 Music
Read: van Zoonen, Ch. 3
- 4/13-15 **Dr. Strangelove**
- 4/20 Globalization
Read: Street, Ch. 4; Barber, “**Jihad v McWorld**,” **Atlantic Monthly**, March 1992, available on line at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199203/barber> or <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics//foreign/barberf.htm>
- 4/22 Research Reports
- 4/27 Research Reports
- 4/29 Research Reports/Conclusions