Sociology 420: Cultural Sociology and the Sociology of Culture (11/18/20)
Wednesdays, 8:00 – 10:50 Central Standard Time, online

Professor: Wendy Griswold  w-griswold@northwestern.edu
Office hours: Any time; just email me to set up an appointment

This course introduces the sociology of culture (understanding social influence on cultural formations) and cultural sociology (understanding cultural influences on social processes). Although the course has no prerequisites, some previous acquaintance with Weber, Durkheim, and Marx will be helpful. Classes will be roughly two-thirds discussion, led by students, and one-third lecture. Students must come to class prepared to discuss the readings and their applications; teams of students will lead each discussion.

Course requirements are:
• Active and prepared participation in class discussions, including leadership
• A report on one of the recommended books
• A term paper, including a short oral report

The term paper may be either: (1) a critical review of the literature on some problem or issue in cultural sociology; (2) a small-scale study, which might turn out to be a pilot study for later research, or (3) a research design (proposal) for a future empirical study, e.g. second-year paper, article, dissertation (this third option is appropriate only if the student has already done preliminary research and knows the literature on the topic). Students need to decide which type of paper they are writing; they will turn in a short description of their proposed papers in Week 3.

Each class will include a short lecture, student-led discussion on the week’s readings and topics, and one or more book reviews. All seminar members should prepare and participate actively in the seminar conversations. (The tradition is that the student team leading the day’s discussion brings snacks; this quarter we won’t be able to, alas, so get your own coffee and munchies.)

NB: All work will be completed and term papers written by the 9th week class. You will not have the exam week to finish your papers. The good news is, you’ll have one course out of the way; the bad news is you’ll have to work like crazy for nine weeks. Strategies for keeping your head above water include
(1) getting ahead on the readings,
(2) forming small groups to discuss readings,
(3) acquiring and reading your book for review well in advance of the actual report so you have time to think about it in relation to the course concepts, and
(4) getting your papers underway right from the start.

Since cultural sociology is a “book field,” normally the assignments for 420 include more books than articles. However, the pandemic has made it harder for many students to get books due to library restrictions and the difficulties foreign students may have in ordering online. Therefore, I am assigning more articles and fewer books; these three books, however, are on the syllabus. The articles can be readily found through the Northwestern Library.


*** Students will prepare all readings before class (including the Williams and Sapolsky for the first week).
Week 1 (Jan. 13): What is culture?

Come to class with an example of the word “culture” used in some reputable news source. Be prepared to discuss the definition of culture implicit in your example, with reference to the Williams and Sapolsky readings.


Week 2 (Jan. 20): How does culture work?


Jerolmack, Global Pigeon, ch. 3.

Week 3 (Jan. 27): Culture and meaning

A one-page description of the paper you are going to write is due in class this week


Jerolmack, Global Pigeon, ch. 4.

Week 4 (Feb. 3): Collective Production


Week 5 (Feb. 10): Cultural Reception, Tastes and Symbolic Boundaries


Week 6 (Feb. 17): Cultural movements and the public


Ocejo, Masters of Craft, chs. 5-8

Week 7 (February 26): Culture and cognition


Week 8 (March 3): Materiality, Bodies, Senses


Week 9 (March 10): Oral presentation of term papers; no additional reading

Recommended books in cultural sociology (aka Wendy's favorites); students should draw their book reviews from this list


