

## **The Centre for Social Studies**

### **Theories of Culture.**

Slawomir Kapralski

#### **Course description.**

The main aim of the course is not to discuss what culture is, but rather to theorize what culture is about. In other words, the course will present the main “topics,” or “issues” of culture, that is the pivotal concerns of human existence as they are culturally represented. In the course we assume human beings as relatively uncomplicated creatures that are basically concerned with four issues only: Death, the Sacred, Power/Violence, and Sex. Thus, in the first few weeks of the course we will study various cultural discourses that have served to (mis)represent those issues as well as the various relations between their cultural representations.

In the second part of the course we focus on the problem of identity that in a way condenses the issues mentioned and makes them on the one hand a personal concern of an individual and—on the other—a social concern of a group. We will discuss “Gender,” “Class,” and “Tribe” as the main types of identification, together with corresponding discourses of sexual roles, lifestyle, nationalism and ethnicity. We will pay attention to the contemporary transformation of the very concept of identity.

The main objective of the course is to see culture as an ambiguous entity that locates itself “in between” different spheres of life. Three of such cultural “in-betweens” will be emphasized:

- A. Culture between “the existential” and “the social;” with the corresponding conflict between individual and social functions of cultural constructs.
- B. Culture between fear and hope; where culture will be analyzed as an answer to our fears and in the same time as their source.
- C. Culture between inertia and transgression; with the corresponding conflict between stability and dynamism as the outcomes of cultural processes.

The intention of the course is to review a great historical and geographical variety of cultures, following an assumption that although all cultures are basically about the same set of concerns, the ways in which these concerns are culturally handled may be radically different and may decide that each culture is a unique entity that only partly can be translated into the language of other cultures. This situation will be treated as the final cultural “in-betweens:” where culture finds itself between unity and plurality or between universalism and particularism.

#### **Requirements.**

There are regular requirements concerning attendance and in-class participation as specified in the MA Course Handbook. Students may be asked to give a presentation during class, based on an assigned reading. The final course essay that will be the basis of the grade must be written on one of the topics, the list of which will be distributed.

## **The content of the course.**

### **1. An introduction to the course. The concept of culture.**

What culture is believed to be: sociology and anthropology between reductionism and monadism. What culture is about: the case study of the forms of fear in Western culture (Jean Delumeau). Culture as a response to fear and a fear-producing activity. Circular self-perpetuation of culture. Fear and Otherness. Culture as an art of managing Otherness. Death as the Unmanageable Other and its avatars. An illustration: "Don Giovanni." From death to seduction, or from myth to opera.

Readings:

**William H. Sewell Jr. 2005 Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. Chapter 5.**

**Elemer Hankiss, 2001 Fears and Symbols. An Introduction to the Study of Western Civilization. Budapest: Central European University Press. Chapter 1**

### **2. Culture and social order. A case study of Merina royal ritual.**

The concept(s) of ritual. Rites of passage and the concept of liminality (Victor Turner). Ritual and ambiguity. Ritual and the representation of the Other. Types of Otherness. Death as Paradigmatic Other. Merina ritual: the synthesis of death, time, and authority. Culture and social order: identity and social structure. Ritual as means of keeping death "in the right place" and "in the right time."

Readings:

**Zygmunt Bauman 1992 Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies. Cambridge: Polity Press. Introduction, Chapter 1.**

**Norman O. Brown 1985 (1959) Life Against Death. The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. Chapter 8.**

**Maurice Bloch 1987 The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar: The Dissolution of Death, Birth and Fertility into Authority. In: D. Cannadine, S. Price (eds.) Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

**Victor Turner 1969 The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure.** London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Esp. Chapters 3 and 4.

### **3. Death, time and the sacred.**

Liminality and death. Existential and cognitive ambiguity of human being. Culture as an attempt to silence the scandal of death Cultural attitudes towards death: death-acceptance, death-denial, death-defiance (Franz Borkenau). Religion and transformation of existential fear into transcendental one. Cultural forms of time (pendular, cyclical, linear) and the attitudes towards death. Double function of time: between existential anxiety and social dynamics. Linear time, individualization, and ontological security. Modern forms of repressing (denying) death: “reversed death” (Philippe Aries) as cultural answer to and source of the lack of ontological security.

Readings:

**Zygmunt Bauman 1992 Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies.** Cambridge: Polity Press. **Chapter 2.**

**Clifford Geertz 1973 The Interpretations of Cultures.** New York: Basic Books. **Chapter 4: Religion As a Cultural System**

### **4. The sacred and power.**

Rene Girard: culture as *victimage*. The sacred and violence: genesis of myths and rituals in acts of foundational sacrifice. Scapegoat and religious belief. Crisis of Degree. Mimetic desire. Religion as a system that maintains the mechanism of victimage in a symbolic-ritual form, in order to keep violence away from the community. “The King” as a personification of violence under control, removed from the community. The sacred “legitimization” of power. Myths, symbols, and rituals of power.

Readings:

**Georges Balandier 1972 Political Anthropology.** Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. **Chapter 5.**

**Clifford Geertz, 1983 Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology.** New York: Basic Books. **Chapter 6: Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power.**

**Rene Girard 1986 The Scapegoat.** Johns Hopkins University Press.

### **5. Power and time.**

On different strategies of power regarding time: from the attempts to stop time to the efforts of controlling its flow. Case studies: French revolutionary calendar,

introduction of “Western time” in Japan, Soviet manipulations of calendar. The immortalization of Lenin.

Readings:

**Christel Lane 1981 The Rites of Rulers. Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. **Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5.**

**Susan Buck-Morss 2000 Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West**. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press. **Section 2.2: Time Fragments.**

## **6. Modern and post-modern cultures: from disenchantment to dissolving of power.**

Michel Foucault: discipline, power and the birth of modern society, political economy and technology of the body. Anthony Giddens: separation of time and space, emptying of time, disembedding of social institutions, problems of continuity, identity, and modernity, ontological (in)security. Modern culture as repression of death. From repression to obsession. Jean Baudrillard: symbolic exchange and death. Zygmunt Bauman: postmodern deconstruction of immortality.

Readings:

**Zygmunt Bauman 1992 Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies**. Cambridge: Polity Press. **Chapter 4, Chapter 5.**

**Jean Baudrillard 1988 Selected Writings**. Ed. by Mark Poster. Cambridge: Polity Press. Chapter 5.

**Michel Foucault 1995 [1975] Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison**. Vintage Books, Inc.

## **7. Power, sex and culture.**

The body in culture: “carnival pleasures” vs. cultural repression. Foucault: investment, discipline and the body; repression. Elias: bodily functions and civilization process. Luhmann: sexuality and love as a generalized symbolic medium of communication. Giddens: modernity, democracy and sexuality. Jervis: modern civilization of the body.

Readings:

**Michel Foucault, 1991 The Repressive Hypothesis**. In: Rabinow, P. (ed.), The Foucault Reader, Penguin Books.

**John Jervis 1999 Transgressing the Modern. Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness.** Oxford: Blackwell. **Chapter 7.**

### **8. Cultural identities 1: Gender.**

Repression and modern gender specializations. The ambiguity of a woman: between nature and culture. Sexual stratification: social structure and sexual roles. Sexual roles as cultural constructions. Sexualization of identities. Bodily knowledge. Gendered time. "Democratization of sex" in modernity and its consequences for gender roles.

Reading:

**Judith Okely 1996 Own or Other Culture.** London and New York: Routledge. **Chapter 4: Gypsy Women. Models in Conflict.**

### **9. Cultural identities 2: Class.**

Pierre Bourdieu: cultural capital and the struggles for reconversion. Habitus and the fields of life-styles. Class and cultural differentiation. Cultural identity and social positions. Struggles over words and the problem of domination.

Reading:

**Pierre Bourdieu 1990 Social Space and Symbolic Power. In: Pierre Bourdieu, In Other Words. Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology.** Cambridge: Polity Press.

**Bourdieu, P. 1994 [1979] Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.** London: Routledge. Esp. Part 2.

### **10. Cultural identities 3: "Tribe."**

The cultural Other. Old xenophobia and modern nationalism. The dangers of relational identity. National community as transgression of an individual fear of death. Case study: Jews and Poles as "people of different times." Nation and death

Reading:

**Zygmunt Bauman 1992 Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies.** Cambridge: Polity Press. **Chapter 3.**

**Benedict Anderson 1983 Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.** London: Verso.

**Anthony D. Smith 2003. Chosen Peoples. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1: Nationalism and Religion. Chapter 2: The Nation as a Sacred Communion. Conclusion.**