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## **BEYOND POLITICAL CULTURE: CULTURE OF POLITICS AND POLITICS OF CULTURE**

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**This is a preliminary syllabus in which only the first 3 classes are fully scheduled. The rest will be completed after we meet and discuss our options. I want the students to be part of this process. Please have a look at the list of possible topics at the end of this document.**

### **Rationale and goals of the course**

Have you ever wondered if a theater performance can change the course of history? Or why inter-religious conflicts are sometimes so vicious? Or to what degree revolutions are religious-like rituals? Or how poetry can challenge the power of an autocrat? Or how people's image of themselves can influence their economic performance? Or how popular attitudes are related to political choices? These and similar topics are explored in this course. We begin by reviewing the state-of-the-art theory on the relationship between politics (particularly power) and culture and explore how "cultural" approaches help us understand such momentous processes as the fall of state socialism, the emergence and consolidation new democracies, the rise of "new" populism around the world, the globalization and the re-definition of the modern state, or the recent wave of ethnic and religious conflicts.

The link between politics and culture belongs to the classical themes studied in social sciences. Arguably, the most famous, seminal work is Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Karl Marx, a materialist, was thinking a lot about culture (a dimension of the social he sometimes called superstructure). Another classic, Emil Durkheim proposed a systematic analysis of collective representations (culture). In political science and sociology, during the *behavioral revolution* of the post World War II era, social scientists tried to build a grand theory that would explain political change and political culture was part of that quest. Research focused on the *beliefs, values and attitudes* of people in different countries, from "primitive" communities to large, industrial societies, but political culture studies increasingly concentrated on the United States or Western Europe where findings from comprehensive, longitudinal *surveys of attitudes* were readily available. Cultural analyses of other societies were have remained a major focus for anthropologists or cultural sociologists.

During the 1970's and early 1980's, the political culture approach (particularly in political science) – as it was then practiced – faced strong criticism and its popularity within the discipline of political science diminished sharply. Over the last thirty or so years, however,

there has been a remarkable revival of cultural approaches both in sociology and political science, coinciding with the far-reaching reconsideration of culture's role in the social science theory, cultural anthropology, gender studies, art history, game theory, economics, and the study of globalization and transnationalization. The change was primarily driven by the revival of thinking about culture not merely in terms of *values* and *attitudes* but also *texts*, *symbols*, and *discourses*. This new conceptualization, most influentially championed by the influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz and heavily indebted to Michel Foucault, allows researchers to focus more clearly on the complex and multifaceted relationship between politics (power) and culture and investigate an intriguing hypothesis that many if not all cultural productions, though not always "explicitly" political, are nonetheless reflective or constitutive of the competition for power.

The course examines several approaches and issue-areas in the fields of political science, anthropology, history, sociology, memory studies, and developmental economics.

**Six** tensions in the conceptualization of culture will be introduced in the lecture and class discussions: (1) culture as a semiotic phenomenon versus culture as a psycho-social phenomenon, (2) culture as a dimension of social/political life that can be studied on both individual and social (collective, inter-subjective) level, (3) culture as a resource versus culture as a constraint for/of political action, (4) culture as seen by the "natives" (*emic* perspective) versus culture as an analytical category of the observer (*etic* perspective), (5) and (5) culture as a relatively stable attribute of social wholes (civilizations) versus culture as a contested terrain subjected to competing interpretations by individuals or groups, and (6) culture as a system of meanings versus culture as a type of (social) practice.

### Requirements

This is lecture course, but students must read the assigned materials before each session. Our discussions will be possible only if you read assigned texts.

Students' performance will be assessed on the basis of FOUR elements:

1. Reading preparation, attendance and active participation in class discussions.
2. Proposal. For **Meeting 7 (Monday, June 17)** students must prepare a two page (maximum 600 words) proposal of their final essays AND a short bibliographic essay (at least 4 readings from the course materials must be included)
3. A presentation of the final project (last 2-3 meetings).
4. Final essay. Due before the end of the grading period (final date TBA).

***The topic of the final paper must be linked to the role of "culture" (in one of the meanings discussed in class) in a political event, phenomenon or process. It has to utilize at least two theoretical approaches or models discussed in class.***

***The outline of the papers MUST specify the problem to be investigated, propose at least TWO approaches that will be used, and outline the methods employed in data gathering (even if this will be an "imaginary" project).***

## Syllabus

### Meeting One (Thursday, June 6, 17:00-19:00)

#### **Introduction. Culture and politics: foundations, questions, problems, and issues**

The first unit of the course introduces students to the basic questions, problems, concepts and methods involved in the study of the politics-culture relationship. Its goal is to show how cultural and political (or economic) dimensions of social life are intricately intertwined and how they influence each other. The basic approaches and concepts (such as culture, politics, discourse, symbol, etc.) are introduced. A brief overview of various methodologies is also presented. Several ways of studying the relationship between culture and politics are identified and briefly discussed. Students are asked to propose examples from their own work (or readings) that illustrate the way culture and politics intermesh.

#### **Required readings:**

- Abdulali, Sohaila. 2013. "I Was Wounded; My Honor Wasn't." *New York Times*, January 8.  
Gladwell, Malcolm. 2008. "The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes." *Outliers*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, pp. 177-223.  
Sauerbrey, Anna. 2016. "What Is German?" *New York Times*, May 26.

#### **And start reading:**

- Aronoff, Myron and Jan Kubik. 2013. "Beyond political culture," in *Anthropology and Political Science: Anthropology and Political Science: A Convergent Approach*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 106-42.

#### **Recommended readings:**

- Johnson, James, 2003. "Conceptual Problems as Obstacles to Progress in Political Science." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15, 1, 87-115.  
Johnson, James. 2002. "How Conceptual Problems Migrate: Rational Choice, Interpretation, and the Hazards of Pluralism." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5: 223-48.  
Wedeen, Lisa. 2002. "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science." *American Political Science Review*, Vol.96, No. 4 (December 2002): 713-28.  
Laitin, David. D. 1999. "National Revivals and Violence," in John Bowen and Roger Petersen, eds. *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-60.  
Kertzer, David I. 1996. *Politics and Symbols. The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.  
-----, 1988. *Ritual, Politics, and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.  
Edles, Laura Delfors. 1998. *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain. The Transition to Democracy after Franco*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Aronoff, Myron. 1991. *Israeli Visions and Divisions. Cultural Change and Political Conflict*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

### Meeting Two (Friday, June 7, 19:15-21:15)

## **Example of analysis: Polarizing symbolism of populism in Poland: from Solidarity to the “Fourth Republic” (with Marta Kotwas)**

We will present an example of the work that utilizes many concepts and theories introduced in this seminar. In *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power* I argued that the success of the *Solidarity* movement in Poland had its roots in the unprecedented mobilization of the counter-hegemonic culture. A cultural revolution preceded and accompanied the political revolution of Solidarity. Its essence was strong symbolic polarization that allowed “the people” to construe themselves in a sharp contrast to the communist regime. The utility of such polarization in a polity consolidating liberal democracy is however questionable. As many theorists argue, a well functioning democracy needs a pragmatic political culture that enables the search for compromises. A symbolically overheated and polarized culture is not helpful, as it exacerbates any tendency to understand the society as sharply divided into two camps, “us” and “them.”

A version of such polarization, the division of polity into “good people” and “bad authorities,” is the hallmark of populism. Under this definition, Solidarity was a populist movement, as its ideology challenged the communists in the name of the mythically or ideologically constituted “people.” But it is not the type of populism most observers think about these days. Over the last several years a number of populist parties and movements emerged in Poland, in a manner recognizable in several other countries. The most prominent is the currently ruling Law and Justice (PiS). We have thus identified two populist phenomena: Solidarity (1980-89) and PiS (with a few supporting groups).

Do they represent the same type of populism? Do they rely on the same or similar repertoire of symbolic tools? In order to answer these questions, we work with the distinction between thin and thick populism and compare their respective symbolic systems.

### **Required readings:**

Kotwas, Marta and Jan Kubik. 2019. “Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland,” *East European Politics and Societies, and Cultures* 33, 2: 435-471. Access here: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10066884/>

Aronoff, Myron and Jan Kubik. 2013. “Beyond political culture,” in *Anthropology and Political Science: Anthropology and Political Science: A Convergent Approach*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 106-42.

## **Meeting Three (Saturday, June 8, 10:00-12:00)**

### **Semiotic approaches. Strong program in the sociology of culture.**

During the last 20-30 years the concept of culture and the understanding of the complex relationship between culture, society, and power have been reformulated and refined. Culture is no longer seen as a relatively static attribute of large collectives, but rather as an incessantly contested field of discourses produced by actors who have uneven access to cultural, economic, and political resources. The unit introduces some of the key writings on the cultural and post-cultural turn in the social sciences. The implications of these new conceptualizations of culture for the understanding of political phenomena are considered.

Swidler's seminal article and her influential work in the development of "cultural" theory and methodology are analyzed. The tone-setting, but now somewhat forgotten, mini-debate between Laitin and Wildavsky is discussed. The strong program in the sociology of culture, most clearly associated with Jeffrey Alexander, is introduced.

Required readings:

- Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review*, 51, pp. 273-286.
- Laitin, David. 1988. "Political Culture and Political Preferences" and Aaron Wildavsky's "Reply." *American Political Science Review* 82 (2) (June): 589-97.
- Alexander, Jeffrey and Phillip Smith. 2010. "The Strong Program. Origins, achievements, and prospects." In *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by John R. Hall, Laura Grindstaff, and Ming-Cheng Lo. London: Routledge, pp. 13-24.

Recommended readings:

- Sewell, William H. Jr. 1999. "The Concept(s) of Culture." In Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, editors, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 35-61.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1989. *Communities of Discourse. Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (particularly: Introduction, pp. 1-22).
- Wilson, Richard. 2000. "The Many Voices of Political Culture: Assessing Different Approaches." *World Politics* 52:2: 246-73.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. "On Symbolic Power." In *Language and Symbolic Power*. Edited and Introduced by John B. Thompson. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 163-70.
- Ross, Marc Howard. 1997. "Culture and Identity in Comparative Political Analysis" In M. I. Lichbach and A. S. Zuckerman, eds. *Comparative Politics. Rationality, Culture, and Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berezin, Mabel. 1997. "Politics and Culture: A Less Fissured Terrain," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23:361-83.
- Wilson, Richard W. 1992. *Compliance Ideologies: Rethinking Political Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dittmer, Lowell. 1977. "Political Culture and Political Symbolism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *World Politics*, 29(4), July, 552-583.
- Cohen, Abner. 1976. *Two-Dimensional Man. An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Somers, Margaret R. 1995. "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation." *Sociological Theory*, 13(2), 113-44.

**The content and the structure of the remaining seven meetings will be determined in a discussion with all the participants during the first and second meetings. The idea is to reflect as closely as possible research interests and needs of the students.**

**The list of possible additional topics:**

The cultures of populism and democracy  
Psycho-social approaches (classical political science approach).  
Methods: interpretation versus explanation.  
Transformations and resilience (the role of culture in postcommunist transformations).  
Culture and Economy.  
Culture Theory (Mary Douglass and Aron Wildavsky).  
Culture and/in International Relations.  
Culture(s) of movements and protest.  
The Politics of Collective Memory.

Times and dates of the remaining seven sessions:

1. Thursday, June 6, 17:00
2. Friday, June 7, 19:15
3. Saturday, June 8, 10:00
4. Monday, June 10, 17:00
5. Tuesday, June 11, 19:15
6. Wednesday, June 12, 19:15
7. Monday, June 17, 17:00
8. Thursday, July 11, 17:00
9. Friday, July 12, 17:00
10. Saturday, July 13, 10:00