

Honors Seminar: Power, Identity, and Culture

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE
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I myself have no race; my father is of recent Albanian origin...my grandmother was a Gonzalez and descended from an Italo-Spanish family from southern Italy...my mother is Sardinian through both father and mother and Sardinia was united with Piedmont only in 1847 after having been a personal fief and patrimony of the Piedmontese princes... Nevertheless my culture is fundamentally Italian and this is my world; I have never felt for a moment that I was torn between two worlds...

Antonio Gramsci, in a letter to his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht, cited in Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*

This is the way hegemony works. I propose that we use the concept *not* to understand consent but to understand struggle; the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination.

William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention"

I want to argue here for a small shift in perspective in the way we look at resistance---a small shift that will have serious analytical consequences. I want to suggest that we should use resistance as a *diagnostic* of power...One of [Foucault's] central propositions, advanced in his most explicit discussion of power, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, is the controversial assertion that..."Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." This latter insight about resistance is especially provocative, but to appreciate its significance one must invert the first part of the proposition. This gives us the intuitively sensible "where there is resistance, there is power"...

Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance"

Cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history. To explain behavior in terms of cultural values is to engage in circular reasoning. The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity (or discontinuity) does not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be created anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering. To maintain and transmit a value system, human beings are punched, bullied, made into heroes, encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, and sometimes even taught sociology.

Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*

This is a course about remembering. This is a class about how we learn to forget. Above all, it is about power—power close to the bone, power made sublime, how power is made and unmade.

This course takes as its central thesis the claim that power, external and objective, is also internal and subjective, invisibly working to shape understandings of who we are even as it performs the visible rituals of bureaucratic regulation typically associated with states and governments. To take this claim one step further, we'll hypothesize that immaterial and invisible forms of domination are power's most effective form even as they are the most difficult to measure and understand. Alternating between case and theory, looking at power both naked and sublime, we will examine the struggle by state and elite actors to shape subjectivities through culture and identity formation in order to secure quiescence and rule. Close attention will be paid to how socializing agents, including schools and educational systems, media and film, families and local communities, shape and reshape efforts to have ordinary citizens internalize what Stuart Hall describes as "the horizon of the taken-for-granted," those ruling ideas and beliefs that consist "of things that go without saying because...they come without saying."

The course is set up as a deliberate conversation between the works of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Stuart Hall, as well as their interlocutors and critics, most notably James C. Scott. The trajectory of this literature carries us from domination "thinly" centered in class and mediated by culture, to power completely de-centered from material forms of rule. Though each author is distinct, if heterodox, in his approach to the question of power, Gramsci, Foucault, Nietzsche, and Hall are bound together by the shared belief that *power is relationship*, between class and culture, culture and identity, state and society.

As we move through the literature, we'll ask, Does there come a moment in which complex, radical elaborations of power produces diminishing returns? The movement away from class and "crude economism" in Gramsci clears the way for a more complex and nuanced considerations of power as it relates to other real-world categories, including gender, ethnicity, and race. Yet this development comes with its own risks. By producing a fractured, even incoherent mapping of power, the subsequent cultural studies and power literatures (potentially) obscures more than it clarifies.

This is where you come in. One of my principal goals this term is to challenge you to consider whether a de-centered understanding of power and empowerment exposes us to the peril of paralysis. Has the capacity to see beyond "just class" so loosened the analytical binds that once held us down that we end up losing our footing altogether? Moving from theory to specific cases of identity formation at work in Mexico, Iran, Syria, Czechoslovakia, on the factory floor in Cairo and in the torture chambers of Chile and Brazil, my hope is to provoke you to theory build, to introduce new horizons of your own making.

Some of the questions we will be asking:

- Who governs? Who has power?
- How do 'they' govern? Is power deliberate?
- Does power, as Foucault claims, circulate? If so, does it circulate evenly? What becomes of the state?
- How might power be measured?
- Is power rooted in the material? Is there a direct correlation between the material realm and power, or does the "base," as it were, merely establish power's range?
- Is power discursive in nature? If so, how do discursive forms of power have material effect in the world?

- Does power emancipate or discipline? Is it possible, as Afsaneh Najmabadi claims, that “disciplinary techniques and emancipatory promises” enable each other’s work?
- How might cultural studies be reconciled with subaltern studies? What, in other words, is the relationship between “symbolic violence” and the real-world, everyday and naked violence too often found in democratic and non-democratic regimes alike?

Why This Course? The Oprah Confessional

There is an old cliché that in doing research, we write our own stories. That I chose to study the politics of culture and identity formation in postrevolutionary Iran for graduate school was not much of a surprise. Born in Iran, my family and I immigrated to the United States when I was still an infant. My father’s work with Caterpillar had brought us to Peoria, Illinois, the proverbial heartland and a proper Midwestern lifestyle. This was soon interrupted by the 1979 Revolution. Changes came around that were as traumatic as they were rapid. Iranians in the United States came under suspicion, transformed overnight into “terrorists” and “camel jockeys” that ought to “go home,” back to where they came from. The trauma of the Revolution became the prism through which the various manifestations of my American identity would be mediated, during eight years in East Texas (from Iranian to “Illinois Yankee”) and then California (the Iranian Yankee transformed into “Tex”).

The Revolution produced reordering and new negotiations with identity back in Iran as well. My Iranian grandmother observed after 1979: “We lived as Muslims for over 50 years. Now they come and teach us what it means to be a ‘real Muslim,’ that all of this time we’ve been doing it wrong?” She was, in this exclamation, referring to the Islamic Republic, the pronoun “they” the term most commonly used in Iran whenever referring to politicians, the government, or its leaders. The context for my grandmother’s plaint is now lost, but over the years her exasperation remained with me because of its obvious irony---my *madarjoon* is a devout follower of her faith, fastidious in her prayers and a *haji khaboom* twice over, having made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The image of a pious Muslim woman protesting the religious policies of the Iranian government did not accord with the image of Iran in the United States as a country populated by the fanatical supporters of a regime of “ayatollahs and mad mullahs.” My grandmother drew upon her faith to criticize the government, and the manner in which the language of her religious practice both fueled and shaped her expression of righteousness. I would see this same appropriation of the “official” several years later and on a much larger scale, recapitulated in June and July of 2009 when millions of Iranians took to the streets of the capital and the country to protest in the Green Movement using the devout language of the Islamic state.

Readings:

The following texts are available for purchase at the bookstore. All other readings are available on Moodle.

- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*,
- Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*
- Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*
- C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*
- Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

- Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*
- Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, editors, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*
- Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Gramsci's Political Thought*
- Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism*
- Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michocán Peasants and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*
- David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Wan, editors, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*
- James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*
- James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak*
- Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*
- Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
- Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*
- Same Shehata, *Shop Floor Culture and Politics in Egypt*
- Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*
- Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*
- Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*
- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*
- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*
- Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*
- Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988*
- Lawrence Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*
- Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*
- Rebecca J. Atencio, *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*
- Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*
- Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*
- Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*
- Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*
- Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*

Assignments:

Sessions will be led by two students who will initiate conversation and debate by analyzing the readings as well as drawing comparisons and connecting (new) dots with the previous discussions and authors. Session leaders are expected to distribute a single 4-page paper to the class by 8 pm on Wednesday. Their classmates will produce a 2-page written response to the week's presentations, readings, as well as class discussion, due on Friday. The responses will be posted online as well as distributed to the entire class via email. All students will be required to produce an original 20-page article, worthy of publication, by the end of the term.

Honors students will have the additional challenge of taking an exam prepared by the outside examiner at the end of the term. I will use this exam grade and the work you have

done in class---written and oral---to give a grade for the seminar.

WEEK ONE **Power and Modernity**

January 21

- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*

WEEK TWO **The Power Debate**

Discussant: Paige

January 28

- Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*
- C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*
- Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City*, Selections

Recommended:

- For an empirical application of Lukes, see Richard Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in Appalachian Valley*

WEEK THREE **Antonio Gramsci and the Hegemonic Project**

Discussants: Saty and Josh

February 4

- Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*
- Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*
- William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, editors, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*

WEEK FOUR **Negotiating Gramsci**

Discussant: Paul

February 11

- Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Gramsci's Political Thought*
- Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism*

WEEK FIVE

Everyday Forms of State Formation: The Case of Mexico

Discussants: Mackenzie and Minh

February 18

- Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*
- Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*
- Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940*, Introduction and Conclusion

Recommended:

- Christopher Robert Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935*, Introduction

WEEK SIX

Stuart Hall: The Toads in Our Gardens

Discussants: Jodie and Josh

February 25

- Stuart Hall, “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists”
- Hall, “Encoding and Decoding”
- David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Wan, editors, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, pp. 1-70, 131-173, 307-323, 393-441, 468-478
- Ellen Willis, “Escape from Freedom: What’s the Matter with Thomas Frank?”

Watch Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993) after this week’s session. What is the central message of this movie? How might Stuart Hall explain this film?

WEEK SEVEN

Romantic Resistance is Futile

Discussant: Mackenzie

March 4

- James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*
- James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak*
- James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Selections
- Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*
- Michel de Certeau, Chapter 7 “Walking in the City” and Chapter 9 “Spatial Stories” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*

WEEK EIGHT

Power, Sublime

Discussants: Saty and Paul

March 18

- Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Chapters 2-9 (pp. 37-182 in the 1980 edition)
- Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, “We ‘Other Victorians’,” “The Incitement to Discourse” (partial), “The Perverse Implantation,” and “Method” (partial)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter 5 “On the Natural History of Morals,” and Chapter 9 “What is Noble?”
- Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, Sections 1-14, Second Essay, Sections 8-15
- Jürgen Habermas, Chapter 9 “The Critique of Reason as an Unmasking of the Human Sciences: Michel Foucault” and Chapter 10 “Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

Spring Break!!! Please read and watch the following:

- Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, Selections
- John Milius’ *Red Dawn* (the 1984 classic, er, original)

WEEK NINE

Working

Discussants: Nehmat and Paige

March 25

- Samer Shehata, *Shop Floor Culture and Politics in Egypt*
- Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*

Recommended:

- Richard M. Ingersoll, *Who Controls Teachers’ Work?: Power and Accountability in America’s Schools*, Selections

WEEK TEN

Learning

Discussant: Minh

April 1

- Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*
- Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*
- Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, Selections
- Sam Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey*, Selections
- Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Selections
- Haggay Ram, “The Immemorial Iranian Nation? School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran”

WEEK ELEVEN

Power, Brute Force

Discussant: Jodie

April 8

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*
- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*
- Darius Rejali, Section Five “Politics and Memory,” in *Torture and Democracy*

WEEK TWELVE

Violence and Memory in Latin America

April 15

- Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*
- Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988*
- Lawrence Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*
- Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*
- Rebecca J. Atencio, *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*

Watch John Sayles' *Men with Guns* (1997) after this week's session.

WEEK THIRTEEN

Gender and Identity in the Middle East

Discussant: Nehmat

April 22

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*
- Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*
- Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*

WEEK FOURTEEN

Power and Resistance, Ordinary and Elite

April 29

- Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless”
- Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*
- Tony Judt, “Captive Minds,” in *The New York Review of Books*
- Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*