

Senior Seminar: Power, Identity, and Culture

WILLIAMS COLLEGE
SHERVIN MALEKZADEH

OFFICE HOURS: TUESDAY 9:00-12:00
EMAIL: SM24@WILLIAMS.EDU

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

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*

“When the great lord passes, the peasants bow deeply and silently far”
Ethiopian proverb (apparently)

This is a course about power—power close to the bone, power made sublime, made and unmade in the fullness of time. The course takes as its central thesis the claim that physical and coercive power meets its match in power that is immaterial and subjective, working invisibly, quietly, to shape understandings of who we are. Far beyond the bureaucratic rites and rituals of states and governments that comprise the traditional concerns of political scientists, alternating between case and theory, we will examine the struggle by state and elite actors to shape the subjectivities of the “ordinary” through culture and identity 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 and James C. Scott, as well as their interlocutors and critics, most notably the late (and incomparable) Stuart Hall. 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 or her approach to the question of power, they are for the most part 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 readings, 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 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, the former Czechoslovakia, on the factory floor in Nebraska 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 include:

- 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?
- Or is power more powerful, as it were, as an idea, a thought? 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 political science? What, in other words, is the relationship between “symbolic violence” and the more material concerns of traditional political science, the 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 a renegotiation with my “original” Iranian identity, both in the US and in Iran. 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?”

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 *madarjooon* is a devout follower of her faith, fastidious in her prayers and a *haji kbanoom* 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 and will be on reserve at Sawyer. All other readings will be on Glow or distributed in class.

- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*
- Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*
- Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*
- James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*
- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*
- Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*
- Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*
- Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*
- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*
- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*
- Sarah Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil*
- Steve J. Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973-1988*

Assignments:

Sessions will be led by either one or 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 2- to 3-page paper to the class by 8 pm on Tuesday. Their classmates will produce a 1- or 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.

Week One September 12 Power: What Is It Good For?

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

Week Two September 19 The Power Debate and the Politics of Identity

- Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, pp. 1-69, 88-151
- Michel Foucault, "Lecture Two: 14 January 1976," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*
- C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, skim pp. 71-77, 83-92; read closely pp. 3-27, 269-324
- Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, 1-19
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, pp. 11-60

Recommended:

- For an empirical application of Lukes, see Richard Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in Appalachian Valley*
- An absolute classic by Ellen Willis, "Escape from Freedom: What's the Matter with Tom Frank (and the Lefties Who Love Him)?"

Week Three September 26 The Culture of Comparative Politics: Negotiating Values in a Rational Choice World

- Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*, pp.
- Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists"
- Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture"
- William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, editors, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*
- Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," pp. 713-720, 726
- Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Can We Choose Our Own Identity?"

Recommended:

- Lisa Wedeen draws heavily from William Sewell Jr.'s essay on culture as a system (fixed, legible) and a practice (fluid, contingent, always changing), "The Concept(s) of Culture"
- Crehan, "Subalternity" and "Common Sense," in *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, an excellent resource
- Appiah, "Can a Philosopher Help Calm the Identity-Politics Wars?"

Week Four October 3 Everyday Forms of State Formation: Leviathan Bound

- James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*
- Joel Migdal, "The State-In-Society Approach," in *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*
- Derek Sayer, "Some Dissident Remarks on 'Hegemony'," in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, editors, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*
- Michael Bérubé, "What's the Matter with Cultural Studies?"
- Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics"

Week Five October 10 Disassembling Consent: The Weapons of the Weak

- James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, pp. 1-16, 202-227
- Scott, "Normal Exploitation, Normal Resistance," in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*
- James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, pp.
- Nader Sohrabi, "Revolution and State Culture: The Circle of Justice and Constitutionalism in 1906 Iran" pp. 253-259, 271-286
- Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, pp. 1-31, 67-86, skim 87-142

Recommended:

- James C. Scott provides a compelling critique of Gramsci's hegemony in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, pp. "False Consciousness or Laying It On Thick?"

Week Six October 17 Imagining the Nation

- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*
- Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community," in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*
- Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, pp. 3-22, 68-94
- Kamran Scot Aghaie, "Islamic-Iranian Nationalism and Its Implications for the Study of Political Islam and Religious Nationalism," in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*

Week Seven October 24

**Remembering—and Forgetting—the Immemorial Past
in Israel and Iran**

- Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*
- Afshin Marashi, Introduction, “Staging the Nation,” and Conclusion, in *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940*

Recommended:

- Joel Migdal, *Through the Lens of Israel: Explorations in State and Society*

Week Eight October 31

Schooling Hearts and Minds in England (and Beyond)

- Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*
- Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, pp. 2-24, 34-51
- Jo Littler, “Meritocracy: The Great Delusion that Ingrains Inequality”
- Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children Without Childhood, Adults Without Adulthood: Changing Conceptions of the Iranian Child in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Textbooks”
- Malekzadeh, “The New Business of Education in Iran”

Recommended:

- Sam Kaplan, “Educational Foundations,” in *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey*

Week Nine November 7

**Resistance through Domination: Gender and Identity in
the Muslim Middle East**

- Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Crafting an Educated Housewife,” in *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*

Week Ten November 14
Worlds

Decolonizing the Mind in the “Second” and “Third”

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*
- Todd Shepard, Introduction, in *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*
- Claire Messud, “Camus and Algeria: The Moral Question”
- Albert Camus, “Letter to an Algerian Militant”
- Vaclav Havel, *Power of the Powerless*
- Czeslaw Milosz, “The Pill of Murti-Bing,” in *The Captive Mind*

Recommended:

- Can't recommend highly enough *The Battle of Algiers*
- Tony Judt, "Captive Minds, Then and Now"
- Zachary Lockman unlocks the difficult but vital analysis of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in "Said's *Orientalism*: A Book and Its Aftermath," in *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*

Thanksgiving Intercession November 15-27

- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*

Week Eleven November 28 The Politics of Representation in Cold War Brazil

- Sarah Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil*
- Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, pp. 1-74
- Watch *Red Dawn*

Strongly Recommended (really):

- An excellent pair of profiles: "The Saturday Interview: Stuart Hall" and "Stuart Hall's Cultural Legacy: Britain Under the Microscope"

Week Twelve December 5 La Memoria Chile after Pinochet

- Steve J. Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988*
- Please watch the short film, *Chile, La Memoria Obstinada (Chile, Obstinate Memory)*

Final paper due on **Saturday, December 15**