Political Culture

Government 6202/American Studies 6202/Anthropology 6102/
History 6202/Sociology 6200

Spring 2016

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Course Description

This course will explore the relationship between popular belief, political action, and the institutional deployment of social power. The class will be roughly divided into three parts, opening with a discussion of the material foundations of ideation in socio-economic “practice.” The middle section will connect socio-economic practice to political ideation, including symbolism and group identity. The last portion of the course will consider the impact of both culture and political ideation on institutional structure and legitimation. This section will also trace how political regimes can influence, coming full circle, the material foundations of cultural ideation.

For our purposes, political culture will usually be viewed as a “spontaneous social formation” beyond the intentional control of any group, class, or institution. The forms that together compose political culture include language, religion, clans, family, patriotism, and class. While all of these are certainly influenced by the exercise of state authority and other organizations, their reproduction through time (including changes in their defining characteristics) depends for the most part on processes and decisions made by numberless, nameless individuals. These individuals, in fact, are often unaware that they are responsible for both maintaining and changing the political culture within which they live.

Thus, we are primarily interested in the more popular aspects of political culture whose dynamics lie beyond the intentional design of elites. Seen from this perspective, the notion of an “elite political culture” is a bit of an oxymoron, if that term were to mean a self-conscious and intentionally designed ensemble of meanings and practices oriented toward the maintenance of elite unity and the advancement of elite interests. However, this notion still has utility as a foil for our examination of its opposite, “popular political culture.” For example, when we compare the political cultures of different societies, the variation is much greater among the practices of popular cultures in these societies than it is among their respective political elites. Much of the relatively limited cultural variation among elites is the direct result of contact between elites in different societies. And much of that contact is intentionally designed for that very purpose (e.g., in the sense of formally sponsored and organized cultural exchanges). There is a reason, after all, that most diplomats wear western-style suits in settings where they meet their counterparts from other nations. This convergence on costume not only reflects the western origins of the contemporary world-system (grounded in asymmetric power relations) but also the need for a conventional “dress code” (whatever the costume) that signals a shared set of meanings, symbols, and expectations as a foundation for trans-national diplomacy.

For reasons that we hope to uncover during the semester, “popular political culture” is both more internally resilient and autonomous than elite culture while generating practices and beliefs that often become the defining attributes of their distinctive political identities as a people and nation. While states and their elites often strive to shape this popular culture, it is this (always partial) autonomy as a “spontaneous social formation” that most interests us.
Course Requirements:

Because this course is designed as a general survey of the very large literature on political culture, a research paper will not be required. Instead, seventy-five percent of the course grade will be based on a take-home final conducted as if it were a small version of a doctoral qualifying examination. An additional fifteen percent will be allocated according to the amount and quality of individual contributions to class discussion. The remainder of the course requirements will be satisfied in the form of short weekly papers (described below).

However, a student can choose to prepare a research paper of (to be negotiated) length in place of the take-home exam. This research paper should be intended for presentation in a professional forum outside of Cornell and/or publication in a professional journal.

Weekly paper assignments:

There will be weekly paper assignments which will be due by midnight on the Saturday before the class session on Monday. These papers will address four primary questions concerning that week’s reading:

1) In a few sentences, briefly summarize the central argument of each of the readings.

2) At what level and in what way can these arguments be reconciled? By “reconciled,” I mean integrated into a unified theoretical framework.

3) At what level and in what way do these arguments diverge? By “diverge,” I mean where do they begin to rely on different assumptions with respect to, for example, the direction of causality, the relationship between belief and behavior, and/or how society and individuals are interconnected.

4) Which of the theoretical frameworks you have now described is most compatible with your own approach to the study of political culture? Why? You may not have adopted a theoretical approach yet. If that is the case, just explain which of the readings is most intuitively appealing to you.

These weekly papers should not be more than five hundred words (single-spaced, two pages at most). You can, of course, write more than that but you will also have an opportunity to bring up things in class discussion as well.

Final exam:

The final exam will have seven questions divided into two parts. Students will answer two questions from each part. The exam will last seventy-two hours with the expectation that students will write for no more than twenty-four hours (roughly the format of the doctoral examinations in the department). There is no minimum or maximum page limit on this exam. Students are expected to draw upon all the readings for the course in answering these questions but are not permitted to bring outside readings into their discussions.
General Theories of Culture

First Session (February 1): Introduction.

Second Session (February 8): The Social Foundations of Political Culture.

Discussion questions:

Throughout the semester, we will be analyzing political culture along two axes. One axis is structured along a continuum between the "bottom-up" (largely spontaneous) generation of culture and its "top-down" elite/institutional manipulation and construction. The other axis plots the creation of culture from, at one end, materialist origins in social practice and, at the other, idealist social constructions that operate (largely) independently of that practice. As you might expect, these two axes can be combined in several ways and every combination oversimplifies what is a complex political reality. But they are nonetheless useful as devices for grouping together and contrasting the literature we will read.

We will start this week with Weber's notion of "social meaning," as evidenced in and as a structural frame for social transactions. Weber intended his concept to serve as the micro-foundation for a vast theoretical superstructure encompassing all varieties and aspects of social life, including the origin and operation of institutions, the emergence of political legitimacy, and religious experience. Whether or not he succeeded does not particularly concern us because his concept of "social meaning" so powerfully relates to similar approaches that we will study this semester.

Where might Max Weber and Charles Taylor reside within the two-dimensional array that these axes describe? With respect to method, Geertz stresses the necessity for what he calls "thick description" in the interpretation of culture. What is "thick description"? How would we utilize it as a method or practice in doing research? What are its advantages and disadvantages as a frame for imagining (if that is what we must do) the micro-foundations of a political culture? Would Geertz even permit us to use the term "political culture" as a concept distinct from other kinds of culture (e.g., religious, community, urban, and so forth)?

Required readings:


Recommended:

Third Session (February 22: Culture as a Spontaneous Social Formation.

Political culture is concerned, above all else, with the generation of collective moral values, popular explanations, and individual social commitments. All these things go into the production of individual preferences as well as social expectations. How might all of these elements fit into one theoretical framework? Could that framework look anything like the one Lynn Hunt sets up for us?

Scott's book raises many questions for us. For one thing, we can ask when and where popular culture constitutes a potent resource for subaltern classes. We can also ask what might be the circumstances under which the state becomes aligned with popular culture. Under what circumstances does the state become perceived as implacably hostile? Along with Scott, we can note that mountains inhibit and plains facilitate the expansion of state authority in the form of administrative practice and day-to-day rule. Would Scott say that mountains and plains necessarily, for that reason, create different kinds of states? Different types of political culture? What is the relationship, in his work, between material practice (as shaped by mountains and plains), state authority, and popular political culture? How is that relationship different from the one Lynn Hunt has proposed? Hint: it is very different...

Required readings:


Recommended:


Michael Tomasello, Origins of Human Communication (Cambridge, Mass.:
Fourth Session (February 29): Social Reality, Performance, and Metaphor.

Discussion questions:

Berger and Luckmann will help us construct a "bottom-up" conception of culture by describing the process through which people come to share a common understanding of the social world. This shared understanding is suspended between individuals and thus dependent on others' comprehension of an individual's action and intention. The resulting "social construction of reality" both enables and limits the range of political possibility when viewed from the vantage point of the individual. Their seminal interpretation of social reality will serve as an anchor for the concept in this session and in many other readings throughout the semester.

While Berger and Luckmann are primarily concerned with how people come to receive and embrace a shared understanding of social reality, Goffman focuses on how individuals use that shared understanding as a stage upon which they "perform" before others. In a sense, Goffman invites us to view the social world from the perspective of the sender of meaning, as opposed to the receiver. Somewhat paradoxically, Goffman’s emphasis on “performance” threatens to erase individual identity altogether in that every social situation involves an inauthentic (but not entirely fictitious) representation of self. Here we might ask whether or not Goffman’s notion of performance, with its endless attending adjustments of self-representation as responses to an audience, can also encompass a consistent and independent construction of self-identity. Put another way, is there any space in Goffman’s social world for the expression of an individual identity unmediated by the social expectations and receptivity of an audience? Or are we, in even the privacy of our own minds, simply “performing” before a social world that has so imprinted itself on our psyches that the western notion of a unique individual identity is a bit of a mirage?

The Grothe book allows us to discuss language as a spontaneous order. From that angle, one of the questions we might ask is whether or not metaphors are a necessary element in all human communication (and thus the essential constituents of a shared social reality). Even if metaphors are unavoidable, we might still be able to choose which ones we use. If so, are we, as agents, in full control of the implications of that choice? From another angle, we might interrogate the metaphors themselves. Should we consider them to be a "bridge" between social practice and political argument (in that metaphors draw on social practice for much of their persuasiveness)? Or, given the very wide range of available metaphors, should we consider them to be idealist constructions that only fictively appear to draw upon materialist practice for their authority? A somewhat different way of proceeding would be to ask whether, if we use metaphors to explain metaphors, there are any conceptions of the world that directly rest on unmediated perception of reality. Or is it really one metaphor after another "all the way down"?

Required readings:


Recommended:


George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).


Fifth Session (March 7): Material Practice and Political Culture.

Discussion questions:

One of the major preoccupations in contemporary social science is the tension between “structure” and “agency” in human behavior. On the one hand, structure denotes the constraints within which people choose their actions. Very narrow constraints imply that those choices are predetermined by features of their social and material environment. On the other hand, agency marks out the range of actions from which humans actually choose. When that range is very wide, humans intentionally and freely determine their destiny. Ultimately, scholarly contention over the relative contributions of structure and agency in human affairs probably turns on whether and how we are willing to entertain “free will” as a meaningful concept. We will only begin to scratch the surface of that debate this week.

Much of the conception of practice that underpins this course was first put forward by Pierre Bourdieu. He proposes a “habitus” of lived social experience as both a frame within which people attach meaning to their actions and choices and a setting in which people make strategic and tactical choices (which are themselves constrained and defined by the habitus). In some ways, this dichotomy sets out a distinction between agency and structure in popular (and political) culture. But, in another way, Bourdieu’s perspective appears to obliterate this distinction altogether. How would you decide between these two interpretations? What are the implications of that choice, in both cases, for causal analysis in social science research?

Coming from another direction, what is the difference, if any, between the habitus and Geertz’s notion of “common sense”? In a sense, the Morris book brings all these things together by positing a micro-level process through which, at the macro-level, popular culture is generated. What can we keep and what must we discard if we accept his argument?

Required readings:


Ian Morris, Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values

Recommended:


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Ideation, Language, and Political Culture

Sixth Session (March 14): State Promulgation of Ideology.

Discussion questions:

Many scholars would contend that the way in which we view the world is unavoidably "ideological" because all social action assumes a vocabulary, a conception of social order, and a causal logic resting upon a particular understanding of human motivation. Because our knowledge of these things is quite contentious and uncertain, we must, in some sense, "choose" the ideological lens through which we construct and then move within the world. However, even though we might say that an individual can choose their ideological lens, we should also recognize that all states more or less attempt to shape that ideological lens for their citizens. And in some instances, one of which we study this week, this attempt becomes so all-encompassing that formal political action and discourse becomes increasingly divorced from what much of the personnel of the state itself considers reality. This, too, is political culture.

The first three readings focus on the generation and maintenance of a "state ideology" that governed elite political practice in the Soviet Union during the years following the revolution. Embedded in this state ideology, as you will see, is both an "objective" (meaning depersonalized) conception of political reality and a "subjective" (but largely illegitimate) personal engagement with its own behavioral and ideational requirements. The last reading displaces this dichotomy from elites onto the popular culture of everyday life and political practice. How does the dichotomy between objective and subjective understandings of state ideology change when we shift from elites to ordinary citizens and rank and file party members? How successful was the Stalinist state in molding popular culture so that it conformed to the official ideology? What could the state have done to further enhance the effectiveness of that project?
Required readings:


Recommended:


Seventh Session (March 21): Ideation, Politics, and the Western Inheritance from the Ancients.

Discussion questions:

Josiah Ober gives us a richly imagined and theoretically complex interpretation of the rise and fall of the Greek city states. While he discusses Greek philosophy from time to time, we should focus more on the way he constructs a political economic explanation of what he calls the Greek "efflorescence." In effect, Ober has described a materialist platform upon which Greek thinkers lived and thought. We then would locate upon that platform Melissa Lane's description of some of the major principles that have come down to us in the present: justice, democracy, and citizenship. There are several questions we might pose by comparing these two books. First, are their explanations of the origins of Greek philosophy theoretically compatible? Second, are these understandings of political culture (as something mediating between Ober's materialist platform and Lane's ideational
descriptions) more or less complementary or, alternatively, at odds with one another? Third, building upon your answers to these two questions, could we simply “mesh” together these two interpretations by assigning them distinct roles or are they simply too different in terms of theory and interpretation for meshing?

Required readings:


Eighth Session (March 24): Theoretical Approaches for Recovering the Unknown.

Discussion questions:

Culture can be interpreted (and implicitly defined) from the “top down” or the “bottom up.” If looked at from the top down, we impose general categories and logical systems that at least go beyond and may even be alien to the experience of the people whose culture we are studying. If viewed from the bottom up, we must rely upon the concepts and logics of the people themselves. In The Cheese and the Worms, Carlo Ginzburg uses the official records of the Inquisition (which imposed their own categories and logics on popular experience and belief) in order to retrieve an otherwise unrecorded and inaccessible cultural world. In effect, we “read through” the Inquisition’s alien accounts to reach the unwritten popular culture of the Italian peasantry. Gordin gives a very different “top-down” perspective which, given current controversies over creationism, global warming, and the origins of same-sex preferences, is much more topical. Where Ginzburg assigns the role of “established authority” to the Catholic Church, Gordin views science as the fount of respectable wisdom. However, science is also socially constructed in the sense that it, like Catholicism, must defend itself in popular culture. And that defense necessarily alters the meaning of what is considered “scientific.”

Required readings:


Recommended:


Ninth Session (April 4): Religion and Politics.

Discussion questions:

Religion is one of the most powerful and salient features of almost every political culture. The reason for this salience is, of course, the popular impulse or needs that religion uniquely (or mostly so) satisfies. Because of this deep connection to individual beliefs and needs, religion usually structures and acts upon politics in the modern world, as opposed to the other way around. So the question for this week is: What is the relation between (a) the beliefs and needs satisfied by religion and (b) the influence religion has upon politics and political culture? While we are particularly interested in the direction of the causal arrows that connect religion, culture, and politics, we might also ask whether some forms of religious belief simply rule out certain forms of politics (and vice versa). For example, is widespread, devout religious belief compatible with the construction of an ostensibly neutral rule of law? What are the unintended consequences when the positivist presumptions of the rule of law attempt to categorize, reshape, and redirect belief in the supra-natural? When people attempt to reconcile religious belief and modern conceptions of society, do their actions reflect: (a) the resiliency of popular culture in the face of state authority; (b) self-interested pursuit of other goals in which religion is clearly secondary or even unimportant; or (c) both of these, in which case the authoritative standing of both the state and the religion are undermined? More fundamentally, how should we understand the relation between (popular cultural) "belief," (state) "authority," and socio-political change?

Required readings:


Recommended:


Ludwig Feuerbach, translated by George Eliot, The Essence of


Collective Identity and the State

Tenth Session (April 11): Identity and Rationality.

Discussion questions:

The basic unit in rational choice theory is the “preference” defined as a relation between two or more alternatives. When an individual chooses one of these alternatives, the individual is said to have expressed a “preference” for that alternative (thereby establishing the relation between the two or more alternatives that were available to the individual). Preference relations held by individuals are subsequently analyzed as they are played out in institutionally-structured games, ultimately producing collective outcomes in the form of laws, public policies, and so forth. The origin of those preferences is usually unaddressed or assumed in rational choice theory.

Another, not incompatible, approach to politics is “path dependence” in which individual expectations drive most of the action. There individuals expect, everything else being equal, that the vast bulk of a political setting to be more or less identical with the last time they entered it. This political setting is comprised of things like the stability of a regime, the most intensely-held preferences of political actors, and the social allocation of power. These expectations, in the first instance, dramatically narrow the range of options that individuals regard as feasible and they discard the rest (often those other options do not even occur to them). As Michael Chwe, one of the two authors we read this week would hasten to point out, individual expectations are shaped by an acute awareness of the expectations of other individuals. But, here too, the origin of preferences lies largely outside the political model.

Alex Pentland proposes a very different framework. For one thing, the notion of individual preferences almost disappears in his concept of “collective rationality.” Pentland also incorporates technological change as a fundamental force driving social organization. For Chwe, technological change merely alters the way in which social mechanisms operate; it does not create new social mechanisms. Their conceptualizations of social behavior vary as well. Chwe sees the individual as the fundamental unit in the study of social behavior where Pentland, in contrast, views the individual as something created by collective social behavior.

What we want to do this week is to explore the ways in which the origins of preferences, the sequencing of political action, and the characteristics of a political setting can be combined. Political culture is concerned, above all else, with the generation of moral values, popular explanations, and individual social commitments. All these things go into the production of preferences as well as expectations. How might all of these elements fit into one theoretical framework?
Eleventh Session (April 18): War, Violence, and Political Culture.

Discussion questions:

Many, if not most, theories of international relations and political behavior suggest that violence is a strategy that peoples and nations choose after rationally calculating the advantages and disadvantages of other alternatives. From this perspective, political culture is a means through which that choice is socially implemented through the enforcement of conformity and the suppression of dissent. However, we could also view political culture as the primary reason why these strategic calculations are performed in that, for one thing, a political culture determines the normative values that attend the evaluation of competing alternatives. But even more than that, political culture may often be seen as overriding strategic calculation altogether. For example, there are four cultural formations that have been responsible, in one sense or another, for most political violence over the last two and half centuries: religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and political ideation/ideology. To be sure, political leaders can invoke these cultural formations in order to mobilize a state and nation behind a calculated choice to use violence to achieve a political end. But, even in those instances, the spontaneous elements that make those formations useful for that purpose also make them largely uncontrollable. This week we address these issues within three radically differing levels of analysis: global civilizations; national civil war; and criminal gang organization.

Required readings:


Recommended:

Ben Kiernan, Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and

Discussion questions:

All states generate ideological justifications for their sovereignty. But exactly how they do this (including whether or not there are a variety of ways of doing this) is unclear. Can we, for example, clearly distinguish between civil society and the state in such a way that we can say that the latter "acts" upon the former (or vice versa)? If so, how does this acting take place? If not, then where does the ideological justification for sovereignty originate and to what does it apply? Gramsci provides some answers to these questions, including the spontaneous (almost unconscious) generation of ideational hegemony. But he also places the communist party outside this hegemony in such a way that the party can at least intentionally act within it. What, in his view, are the similarities and differences between the party and the state with respect to the generation of ideational hegemony? With respect to the exploitation of political opportunities within that hegemonic system?

Now take a long look at Said's Orientalism in which "scientific workers" actively translate personal experience into an ideological vision of the world. Would either Gramsci and/or Said grant these "scientific workers" agency (in the sense of being able to act intentionally within and upon a hegemonic culture)? Are their several conceptualizations of agency mutually exclusive? Would have those "scientific workers" claimed that agency, regardless of what Gramsci or Said thought?)

Required readings:


Recommended:


Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Lenin

Thirteenth Session (May 2): Nationalism and Imagined Communities.

Discussion questions:

One of the issues in this course is how we might explain the emergence of a deep emotional commitment to a “nation” and a “people.” These commitments clearly drive much political action and belief and yet remain outside most contemporary political analysis. The major exception is the study of nationalism, where the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, nationalism is often treated as a “given” in political action, a factor whose origins are not investigated. On the other hand, nationalism is also considered a social construction that then can be intentionally deployed. What are the limits of this intentionality? Put another way, how much of nationalist feeling is a spontaneous (meaning outside intentional design) product of popular political culture? And how much of nationalist feeling is, in fact, generated by hostility between competing political cultures (as opposed to an indigenous generation of collective identity)?

From one angle, we might view the perspective taken by Hopf’s Reconstructing the Cold War as more or less consistent with Anderson’s Imagined Communities. Are they, in fact, consistent in the sense that they one could be enfolded into the other? What would limit their theoretical enfolding? In answering that question, you might consider the different ways in which they might respond to Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations. Now do the same thing for Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism. Is her account of the rise (and, for her, the fall) of the nation-state compatible with Anderson’s interpretation? Would “imperialism” be the same thing for Hopf and Arendt? And what would she have done with Huntington?

Required readings:


Recommended:


Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).


Fourteenth Session (May 9): The Architecture of Power.

Discussion questions:

We began this semester with an examination of the social construction of meaning and reality. We then looked at ideation, the construction of group identity, and cultural formations such as religion and nationalism. In those sessions, we were particularly interested in the relation between structure and agency and the relative autonomy of political culture from elite control (particularly the state). This week we complete the circle by examining how the state constructs the very architecture through which it attempts to control political and social culture. As we shall see, this architecture is both material (in the sense of the design of physical structures) and ideational (in the sense that an intent is embedded in those physical structures with respect to how the latter might "engineer" individual and collective identities and values). The intentionality underlying this architecture is sometimes ambiguous even though publicly pronounced. That ambiguity produces effects that seem rife with unintended consequences, both for the objects of state attention (e.g., criminals and gladiators) and the citizenry at large. Is this because state officials do not quite know what they are doing or, alternatively, is the entire project inherently problematic (if the goal is to achieve those stated intentions)? And those questions clearly involve the role of "agency"...something that Foucault, Fagan, and Geertz don't quite see the same way.

Required readings:


Recommended:

Michel Foucault, History of Madness (Routledge, 2009).