

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, BGU

Course: The Culture Concept in Anthropology

M.A. Elective Seminar in Anthropology

First Semester, 2008—Sundays 14-16 (2 credits)

Prof. Fran Markowitz

Course Description: "Culture," long considered *the* subject matter of anthropology--as well as the distinguishing feature of the discipline that separates it from history, sociology and psychology--has been conceptualized, operationalized and analyzed in a variety of ways throughout academic anthropology's 100+ years. Toward the end of the 1980s, at the peak of anthropology's harsh self-criticism, the culture concept itself--and not just "writing culture"--became the target of controversy, leading some prominent scholars to declare that the culture concept should be abandoned. At the same time, other academic disciplines, particularly history and literature, took a "cultural turn" and established programs in Cultural Studies.

This course examines key writings in the development of the culture concept and then traces processes within academic anthropology that led to its dénouement and resurrection. This course will provide graduate students with the materials needed to formulate and support their own theoretical premises about the necessity—or not—of culture as the foundational base of anthropology.

Course Requirements:

- I. This course will be conducted as a seminar, meaning that students are **REQUIRED** to come to each and every session having read and thought about the assigned reading(s). Class participation=engagement in discussion (not simply presence in the classroom) counts for 33.3% of the course grade.
- II. **Midterm Essay:** A written thought piece, 5 pages double-spaced, is **due at the beginning of class #7** ((December 6th). It should contain (tentative) answers to the following questions:
--How do the 'natives' of the society you are studying [or for those of you who have not as yet embarked on fieldwork, the society in which you live] conceive of culture? How do they use this word in daily speech? What do they mean by such usages?
--What are the theoretical and practical differences between these popular meanings of culture and the anthropological discussions of the culture concept that we have read thus far? Are there any similarities? (worth 33.3% of the course grade)
- III. **Final Essay:** As a graduate student in anthropology, do you support or oppose anthropology's insistence on culture as its theoretical foundation and subject matter? If you **support** the culture concept, develop an argument that explains this support. Use published scholarly texts (at least 10, including at least 3 outside of assigned readings) in developing your argument. You may supplement these references with your field experiences. If you **oppose** the culture concept, please suggest something else that would unify the discipline...unless you believe that anthropology

should self-destruct and redistribute itself among its step-sister disciplines (e.g. cultural studies, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology).

Develop your argument with the help of published scholarly texts (at least 10, including at least 3 outside of assigned readings) and supplemented, if you wish, by your field experiences.

In both cases, the papers should be 5-7 pages long, double-spaced. They are **due** two weeks after the last class by **3 pm, Sunday, March 1, 2009**.

Class Schedule

- I 16 November: Introductions
Why are you pursuing a graduate degree in anthropology? What's *culture* got to do with it? What is culture? How do you know it when you see (hear, smell, touch, taste) it? Or do you? Does everyone have it? Do all peoples embody, display and represent it? What do anthropologists mean when we talk about culture? What do people on the street say about culture, and what do they mean?
These questions will inform class sessions throughout the duration of the course.
- II 23 November: Old and New Models of Culture
Are they really so different?
READING: Susan Wright. 1998. The 'Politicization' of Culture. *Anthropology Today* 4(1):7-15. <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/rai/AnthrToday/wright.html>
- III 30 November: **Field exercise (no class meeting)**
Use this class period to conduct informal fieldwork for your midterm assignment. Ask people to tell you about their culture; what do they mean when they use that word? How, if at all, do they describe the contents of their culture? In what ways do they distinguish their culture from others? Where do they place the lines of divide?
- IV 7 December: Old Models of Culture (that were new in their time)
Holism, coherence, internal logic
READINGS: Edward Tylor. 1871—excerpts from *Primitive Culture*;
Franz Boas. 1932--excerpts from "The Aims of Anthropological Research"
- V 14 December: American Cultural Anthropology
READINGS: Ruth Benedict. 1934. *Patterns of Culture*, pp. 16-20 & 37 & 45-56;
Margaret Mead. 1935. Introduction and Conclusion to *Sex and Temperament*.
Metaphors of patchwork; selection, integration; culture shapes the person
AND people can re-shape their culture.
- VI 21 December: Culture as a Symbolic System
READINGS: Leslie White. 1959. *The Evolution of Culture*, pp. 3-18; Clifford Geertz. 1973. *Religion as a Cultural System* (available in Hebrew)
To be human is to symbol, to endow and be endowed with meaning

- VII 28 December Culture as a Super-Organic Phenomenon
READINGS: A. L. Kroeber. 1963. *Anthropology: Culture, Patterns & Processes*, pp. 1-2, 7-10, 60-64;
 Michael Lambek and Janice Boddy. 1997. Introduction: Culture in Question. *Social Analysis* 41(3):3-23.
 Culture preceding and superseding individuals
 Culture as something that all peoples are and that all peoples have
MIDTERM ESSAY DUE
- VIII 4 January: Partial Cultures? Cultural Breakdowns?
READINGS: Robert Redfield. 1956. *Peasant Society and Peasant Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chapter III, pp 40-59;
 Clifford Geertz. 1973. "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example" (available in Hebrew).
 What do studies of peasants reveal about their societies? About confrontations with systems of domination? About the culture concept? What did Redfield and Geertz leave unsaid?
- IX 11 January Immigration, Urbanization, Colonialism and Cultures in flux—
READINGS: J. Clyde Mitchell. 1956. *The Kalela Dance*, pp.1-15, 42-44;
 Oscar Lewis. 1965. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*, pp. xi-xviii; xlii-lii.
 Tribesmen→Townsmen; Cultures of Poverty and shades of Marx
- X 18 January: The Boundaries of Culture
READINGS: Edmund Leach. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, pp. 1-3; 60-61, 281-285; Fredrik Barth. 1969. Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Eric Wolf. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*, pp. 3-9 & 13-23 & Afterword; Renato Rosaldo. 1989. *Culture and Truth*, pp. 25-30; 207-214.
 Where do cultures begin and end? What kind of culture in the borderlands?
- XI 25 January: The Colonized's Revenge?
READINGS: Stuart Hall. 1997 [1991]. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity";
 Verena Stolcke. 1995. Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe. *Current Anthropology* 6(1):1-24 [available on JSTOR].
 The Empire Comes Home—Race and Culture, a new convergence?
- XII 1 February: Post-Colonialism's Hope of Hybridity
READINGS: "Interview with Homi Bhabha," 1990;
 Paul Gilroy. 2000. *Against Race*, pp.246-254.
 Bhabha's "Third Space" and Gilroy's appeal for de-essentialization
- XIII 8 February: Rejecting the Culture Concept
 De-essentialization; anti-reification; pleas for process over system
READINGS: Lila Abu-Lughod. 1991. "Writing Against Culture";
 Fredrik Barth. 2001. Rethinking the Object of Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 103(2):435-437.

XIV 15 February: Rethinking the Rejection

READINGS: Marshall Sahlins. 1999. Two or Three Things that I Know about Culture. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5(3):399-421;
Fran Markowitz. 2004. Talking About Culture: Globalization, Human Rights and Anthropology. *Anthropological Theory* 4(3):329-352 [both available on-line].

FINAL ESSAYS DUE: 1 March 2009 by 3:00 p.m.

No late papers will be accepted