Geography 605:03
Critical Ethnographies of Power and Hegemony

D. Asher Ghertner

Tuesdays 1-4pm, LSH-B120

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Course Introduction

This course takes the ethnographic examination of social power as its central object. Our key concern is with the production of consent; the exercise of resistance, counter-conduct, and disagreement; and the institutional and cultural apparatuses that limit or facilitate transgressions of hegemonic norms. Why does the working class participate in forms of economy that reinforce their subordinate status? How do popular opinion, ideology, and doxa produce socialized norms for guiding behavior and thought? What are the mechanisms that lead subjects to “do as they ought,” even when it seems against their interest to do so? How are subjectivities fashioned so as to conform with social norms, even while retaining the capacity to exist otherwise?

To address these broad questions, we will follow a model of pairing a canonical social theory of power or hegemony one week with an ethnographic text that builds on or draws from that theory in the week that follows. While avoiding the sense that ethnographic texts can or should be slotted into neat theoretical camps, we begin with more paradigmatic ethnographies that allow us to interrogate how the deployment of different theories of power carry with them different analytical and political stakes. In other words, these texts help us ask how, for example, a Marxian method of moving, as Marx calls it, from the abstract to the concrete differs from what Foucault calls an “ascending analysis of power,” or how Gramsci’s approach to studying the cultural production of hegemony differs from Bourdieu’s theory of how external structures are internalized among agents. In this sense, our focus will be methodological as much as it is theoretical, and it begins from a theory of praxis that holds that method and theory are inseparably fused: which social agents are highlighted, and what forms of agency are revealed and concealed, are at once political and methodological concerns.

We follow this model of pairing theory with ethnography not to suggest that ethnography descends from “T”heory, but rather to consider how "E"thnography provides a critical infrastructure for confronting the limits of theory, identifying new social problematics, and opening up lines of thought for understanding and advancing concrete possibilities for political
change. The final weeks of the course are left open for seminar participants to choose ethnographies related to our collective interests.

**Requirements**

This course will be run as a reading-intensive seminar. Each week we will systematically discuss the argument, method and implications of the texts; present ideas and questions to each other; and generally learn from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives we all bring. Accordingly, it is imperative that everyone comes fully prepared to participate.

Each participant will be expected to undertake the following:

(i) During our “theory” weeks, seminar participants should identify 1-2 key passages from the text that they consider central to the author’s argument, or central to a key concern or concept from the seminar. Participants will introduce these passages in seminar, offer a critical reading of the passage, and relate the passage to the larger argument of the book or broader themes of the course.

(ii) During our “ethnography” weeks, seminar participants should prepare a short one page **critical commentary** on the week’s readings and post this commentary on the Sakai forum for that week by the Monday evening (no later than 8 pm) prior to the Tuesday class. Critical commentaries should be more than a summary of the argument of a text; they should be “critical” in the sense of seeking to identify the text’s evidentiary limits or strengths, epistemological presumptions or innovations, or strategic utility or weakness. Because they will address specific ethnographies, this is also the place to think through the nature of the field research conducted and the way that the ethnographic encounter is presented. What did the field research that went into the production of the text likely look like, and how was it transformed into the text? How do authors make analytical claims on the basis of observations and texts? What theories are enrolled to mobilize these claims?

(iii) During our “ethnography” weeks, a pair of participants will **lead/chair class discussion**, which involves a short (5-10 minute) presentation of the key theoretical and conceptual issues in the readings. I will circulate a sign-up sheet during week 1 for you to choose the week you’d like to present.

**Course papers**

The main assignment for this course consist of three papers, approximately 5 pages in length each, that are to engage the readings from the preceding weeks. Given that some seminar participants are preparing for their written qualifying exams, while others will be doing so in the near future, I’d like to think of these papers as mini-field statements that aim to capture the key arguments and differences between authors. In this sense the papers – while not requiring a single, overarching argument – should aim to identify key fault lines in scholarly debate, or key resonances between authors often treated as belonging to distinct camps. It is expected that you will incorporate supplemental texts into your papers.

**Assessment**
Students will be assessed according to the following scheme:

Critical commentaries & presentations 20%
Classroom participation 20%
Course Papers (20% x 3) 60%
Total 100%

Readings

Required course texts:


All additional readings will be posted on the course website on Sakai or placed on reserve in the Kilmer Library.

Seminar Outline

**Week 1 (September 2nd) – Introduction**

Readings:

**Week 2 (September 9th) – Marx’s Method**

Readings:
Marx, Karl (1845), “Theses on Feuerbach,” from *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*
Marx, Karl and Frederich Engels (1846), “The German Ideology, Part I” from *Karl Marx:*

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Selected Writings.

Additional readings:

Week 3 (September 16th) Critical ethnography of class

Readings:
Willis, Paul (1981). “Cultural production is different from cultural reproduction is different from social reproduction is different from reproduction,” Interchange, 12(2-3), 48-67.

Week 4 (September 23rd) - Gramsci

Readings:
The Antonio Gramsci Reader (edited by David Forgacs). NYU Press (selections).

Additional Readings:

Week 5 (September 30th) – Critical ethnography of the state

Readings:

Week 6 (October 7th) – Determination, articulation and dominance

Readings:
Williams, Raymond (1977). Marxism and Literature, Oxford University Press, Part II.
Hall, Stuart (1985). “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,”

Additional readings:

Week 7 (October 14th) – Paper 1 Due via Sakai
No class – Asher travelling for a talk in Singapore

Week 8 (October 21st) – Critical ethnography of race

Readings:

Week 9 (October 28th) – Foucault

Readings:
- What is Enlightenment?
- Nietzsche, Genealogy, History
- Madness and Society
- Panopticism
- Questions of Method
- Lecture 1 and Lecture 4 (“Governmentality”) from Security, Territory, Population
- The Birth of Biopolitics (course summary)
- Preface to the History of Sexuality, Vol 2
- The Subject and Power

Additional Readings:

From The Essential Foucault:
Technologies of the Self
Foucault by "Maurice Florence"

Week 10 (November 4th) – Critical ethnography of development
Week 11 (November 11th) – Bourdieu

Readings:

Additional reading:

Week 12 (November 18th) – Critical ethnography of practice

Readings:

Week 13 (Nov 25th) – Paper II due via Sakai

No class due to Thanksgiving break

Week 14 (December 2nd) – Other hegemonies

Weeks 15 (December 9th) – Final book TBA

Some options:

Paper III due via Sakai on December 15th