Culture, Hierarchy, Difference

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How does the notion of culture help us make sense of inequality, hierarchy and difference? Why is culture an intensely debated and contested term in the discipline despite the extensive theorization and empirical engagement with it?

Answers to such questions may be found if we see cultures not as self-contained wholes, but in contexts of their economic interconnections and interdependence. Moving away from the notion of spatially bounded cultures, this course takes as a given that cultural difference is historically produced in shared and connected spaces, within given fields of power relations. In addition to learning how to write about culture, the “work” it does, as well as the theoretical and comparative perspectives it offers, the course introduces innovative approaches to understanding culture and inequality.

Beginning with the utility of comparative perspectives, we first review a few specific examples of colonialism and the varied forms of exclusion it produced in different settings. To deepen our understanding about difference in the contemporary, notions such as Minority, Multiculturalism and Coexistence are subjected to scrutiny. Our focus on Caste hierarchy is an opportunity to rehearse the experiences of Dalits in the writings of Ambedkar, and his crafting of the Indian constitution. Further nuanced discussions on difference emerge from an influential debate between Sahlins and Obeyesekere on the way “natives” think. Canonical ethnographies of the “other” by Michael Taussig, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard are followed by readings on the interface of Islam, globalization and gender inequality. An inconclusive debate on the notion of Culture and its very relevance for our discipline ties together the many strands explored. Each week’s readings then, familiarize students with theoretical orientations that guide our investigations, and the rigor of our methods.

Course Conduct

The course will meet for four hours per week. In-class participation and lively discussion will depend on thorough readings of the prescribed texts, as well as additional references, if offered by the instructor.

Each week will be divided into two parts: the topic of the week introduced in the first lecture will be followed by discussion on the theme in the second session. We shall also discuss how to write analytically and comprehensively, and hold short writing exercises in the second class of the week.
Learning in this course entails a two-way process. While the first is concerned with reading, listening to lectures and comprehending the arguments, the second involves active student participation to debate and analyze arguments in class, and for homework. Students are also required to upload on a special class blog, a one or two page response paper as weekly homework. In engaging with each other’s papers, students also learn from their peers. This writing component of the course aims to develop both analytical and writing skills.

This course design requires regular and timely class attendance. The instructor will provide insights and viewpoints over and above the prescribed readings and as such, missing a class will set the absent student back considerably. Since class time will build upon the assigned readings of the week, the relevant pages/chapters/essays are to be read by students prior to the week's sessions. As such, students are expected to have read the assigned texts before the first lecture every week.

**Grading**

In addition to their weekly responses, students will write two term papers – one midway in the course and one at the end. A book review of a book authored by any of the major thinkers in the course must be submitted for the mid-term exam. The final exam will be a term paper preferably based on independent fieldwork. Students will develop this throughout the semester. The research paper of not more than 12 double space pages is to be submitted as final term paper. Themes for term papers and book choices are to be made in consultation with the Instructor.

- Class presentations and weekly responses 30%
- Mid term paper Book review 20%
- Final term paper 30%
- Research paper 20%

Finally, no copying of any kind whatsoever from the net or other sources will be tolerated at any stage in the course, including in weekly submissions. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with University rules regarding plagiarism, and the seriousness of the offence.
Course Outline by Week

1. Culture and the Uses of Comparison


2. Colonialism and Difference


3. The Intimate Enemy


4. Minority - 20th century Implications of a Category


5. Multi-Culturalism, Tolerance, Coexistence


6. Caste Hierarchy
7. Ambedkar and The Indian Constitution


Gupta, Dipankar 2004. *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy*, New Delhi: OUP

8. A Dalit Ethnography


9. Debate: Sahlins and Obeyesekere


10. An ethnography of Fear and Terror


12. Debate: For and Against Culture


13. Gendered Others


14. Presentations