Organizing Culture Change

HIST 387/ PSYC 461/ MGMT 491-002/ CONF 399/ SOC 395
M 1:30-4:10 PM Krug Hall 210

Instructor of record: Peter N. Stearns
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Culture change constitutes an important and complex phenomenon, both in human societies and in organizations. Changes in culture, and resistance to change, deeply affect a variety of contemporary issues. This course assesses several types of culture change, both American and international, in an interdisciplinary context, drawing from psychology, sociology, business, conflict analysis, and history. Case studies will range from religious conversions to corporate settings to conflict management, toward finding common patterns and best practices in implementing and analyzing culture change. Students, drawn from several relevant majors, will develop research topics and group discussions to explore additional themes in the field.

Readings: Stearns with O’Neill and Censer, Culture Change—available for purchase. Various articles assigned per session and available online.

Requirements:

- Class participation, including active participation in the periodic “debates” or issues discussions (there are seven in all); one write-up of reactions to one of the debates due as part of this, 2-3 pages, due no later than November 20. (30%)
- Several brief papers relating to assigned readings, 1-2 pages, due in class as a hard-copy or email attachment. (10%)
- A research topic proposal and exploration. Topic statements are due October 5. Each student will develop a project but will discuss it periodically in an interdisciplinary student group. (Group discussions will occur as part of several of the later class sessions). Papers should be 12-15 pages in length and are due December 2nd in class as a hard-copy or email attachment. (30%)
- Take home final examination. (30%)

Important:
Please consult the Blackboard course site before every class. The Blackboard site has discussion questions and, often, Document readings. Click on “Course Content” on the left menu bar to find the relevant course materials.

Academic Honesty and Collaboration:
The integrity of the University Community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. GMU has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple practices to follow at all times are that: 1) all work submitted be your own; 2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and 3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification.
Mon, Aug 26 | Session 1: Introducing culture and culture change; culture as causation; cultural globalization.

- What is culture and why is it important?
- What is culture change? Why is it complicated? Has culture change accelerated in modern times?
- What are some of the most important cultural changes in the US over the past 50 years?
- Identify a current “culture issue” in a society, or an organization or at GMU where you would like to see change? How does one go about effecting culture change?
- What are some leading culture changes going on in the world today?

Debate: Is American culture more open to change than most other world cultures? Why, or why not?

SEP 2 | LABOR DAY

Mon, Sept 9 | Session 2: What is Culture? And the challenge of cultural diversity

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming), Ch’s. 1+2.

Assignment: list at least three culture change topics beyond those covered in the case study book. Due by beginning of class.

Debate: What are the most pressing cultural problems today?

Mon, Sept 16 | Session 3: Big Culture Change and an Analytical Model

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 3.

Assignment: 1-2 page paper on causes of decline of magic in European culture. Due by beginning of class, hard-copy or by email.

Mon, Sept 23 | Session 4: Culture Change, Revolution and Protest

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 4.

Debate: Do revolutionary cultures still exist today, especially given the decline of Marxism? Is protest more reactive or proactive?

Mon, Sept 30 | Session 5: Organizations and Culture Change

• Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 5.

Assignment: 1 page description of paper topic due. What is the topic and why is it significant? Due by beginning of class, hard-copy or by email.

Mon, Oct 7 | Session 6: Culture Change and Health
Example: vaccinations
• Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 6.

Debate: What are the downsides of the modern approach to grief and death? Are there any signs of change?

Tue, Oct 15 | Session 7: Culture Change and Prejudice
• Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 9.

Debate: What are the cultural issues and complications in the #MeToo movement? Is it fair to impose new standards on past behaviors? Will they expand or retreat?

Assignment: 2-page discussion: is the contemporary American culture of death a problem? Due by beginning of class, hard-copy or by email.

Mon, Oct 21 | Session 8: Cultural Issues in the Contemporary U.S.
Is the US in a cultural crisis? (Why is wellbeing declining in a strong economy?)
• Thomas Brewer, “The Loneliness Epidemic”, *Tabletalk* (March 2019)
  https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2019/03/the-loneliness-epidemic/

Debate: What are the special features of American culture in comparative context? What would a foreigner particularly note?

Mon, Oct 28 | Session 9: Culture Change and Conflict
**Debate:** what are some key cultural issues in global conflicts today?

**Mon, Nov 4 | Session 10: Mobilizing Culture Change**


*Reaction paper due on Chauncey reading, 1-2 pages. Due by beginning of class, hard-copy or by email.*

**Debate:** Does the US have a militaristic culture? When did it develop? Can/should it change?

**Mon, Nov 11 | Session 11: Student Topic Presentations**

*Written prospectus due*

**Mon, Nov 18 | Session 12: Culture Change, Contacts and Globalization**

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 8.

*Debate:* What are the plusses and minuses of cultural globalization? What are the alternatives? What is the culture of nationalism? When did it emerge?

**Mon, Nov 26 | Session 13: Culture and Emotions**

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch.7.

*Debate:* Is modern culture ready for the growing importance of the elderly?

**NOV 27- Dec 1 | THANKSGIVING RECESS**

**Mon, Dec 2 | Session 14: Two (partly) Cultural Issues: Environment and Family**

Is it possible to accelerate concerns about environmental change? Are there culture change techniques to apply here? What are the current major issues in American family culture—marriage, birth rate, etc.

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Conclusion.