Organizing Culture Change, Autumn, 2022

HIST 387/ PSYC 461/ MGMT 491-002/ CONF 399/ SOC 395
Class time: Wednesdays at 1:30 in Krug Hall 242.

(Fully face to face)

Instructor of record: Peter N. Stearns
E-mail: pstearns@gmu.edu (feel free to email)
Office Hours: Office hours (preferably by appointment Wed. 10:30-12:30, East 207A, or by arrangement at other times.

Main purpose of course
Culture change, or significant shifts in basic beliefs and values, is an important phenomenon, both in the past and today; but it is not always easy to understand and explain. It’s much harder to pin down, for example, than policy change. This course uses a case study method to provide greater experience in evaluating culture change. As we watch possible culture changes in our own society (and resistance to change), for example in racial attitudes, greater familiarity with patterns of this sort has obvious contemporary relevance.

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 both in analyzing and in implementing culture change. Students, drawn from several relevant majors, will develop research topics and participate in various discussions to explore additional themes in the field.


Various articles assigned per session and all are available on Blackboard

Timing of assignments: Assignments, including Participation responses, are due by 10 PM on the date specific, by email attachment to instructor. Students should feel free to discuss with instructor any issues that justify additional time. Late materials will be accepted until near the end of the course but, unless excused, with a reduction in grade.

Requirements and grading

The main components of the grade are as follows: 25% class participation; 15% three shorter essays; 35% research paper; 25% take-home final.

Class participation 25%. One weekly comment paper on a question provided each Thursday, due the following week (Fri.) by 10. 250-500 words. Students who turn in at least 10 satisfactory comments, of the 14 possible, will receive an A for this segment. But fairly regular participation is required for this
grade. Additional credit may be given for participation in weekly Discussion Board exchanges or other
direct exchanges with Prof. Stearns, or for activity in class. *Where possible, please complete assigned reading for the week before class.*

Brief papers: 5%. One paper due in session 3, on the causes for the decline of magic; one paper due Session 9, on “lessons” from gay rights movement. Papers 300-500 words or so.

Exploratory paper: 10% due Session 4: each student will explore one culture change issue with selective research. 1000 words. Assignment will be explained in Week 1. See Appendix for list of topics.

Research paper: 35%. Due on day of final session. 3500 words or so, with prospectus presented in advance and topic to be approved by instructor. Topic statements due Oct 1. A later class will feature topic presentations. Topics will involve exploration of a particular example of culture change of interest to you (U.S., international, or comparative).

Take home final: 25%. Due one week after end of classes.

**Important:**
Please consult the Blackboard course site **before** every class. The Blackboard site has discussion questions and, often, article or excerpt readings. Click on “Course Content” on the left menu bar to find the relevant course materials. There will also be a Discussion Board exchange every week except for the final week. Weekly participation questions will also be emailed to each student.

**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.
**Wed, Aug 24** | **Session 1: Introducing culture and culture change; what is culture? Culture as cause and effect.**

- 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 leading culture changes going on in the world today?
- What are some of the most important cultural changes in the US over the past 50 years?
- Is the US currently in a major cultural crisis? How can this be defined (and when did it start)?

Reading: Peter Stearns *Culture change*, ch 1.

**Wed, Aug. 31** | **Session 2: What are some leading culture change topics? How to analyze culture change**

- Stearns, *Culture Change*, ch 2.

Assignment: in advance of class, send in at least one major contemporary culture change issue (US or elsewhere). We will discuss these in class. 
Also for discussion: why has the US done worse than virtually every other country in dealing with Covid? 
What cultural factors are involved in this issue?

**Wed, Sept 7** | **Session 3: Big Culture Change: religion, enlightenment, the state**

- 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.

Discussion questions: why and how was the Enlightenment such a major change in Western culture? Are there “big” culture changes issues developing in the world today? How do mass religious conversions figure in culture change?

Is the advent of consumer culture another examples of big culture change??
What kinds of factors cause major cultural change?

**Wed, Sept 14 | Session 4: Culture Change, Revolution and Protest**

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

Discussion questions: What is the role of culture in revolution? Are revolutionary cultures available today, now that Marxism has declined? What kind of cultural framework is involved in current “populist” protests?

Exploratory paper due (this assignment will be explained separately)

**Wed, Sept 21 | Session 5: Organizations and Culture Change**

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


Discussion questions: How does organizational culture change differ from more general types of culture change? (Think of at least one example of organizational culture change in addition to those discussed in the readings) Is it possible to change police culture? What kinds of cultural changes are occurring, or should be occurring, at Mason?

- Due: brief prospectus on research paper. The prospectus, at least 250 words, should define the topic and show its relevance to an understanding of culture change. The topic can be a current culture change issue, or more strictly historical; American or international.

**Wed, Sept 28 | Session 6: Culture Change and Health and Death: cultural construction**

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 6.
Discussion questions: Is modern culture handling death fairly well, or is this a big challenge? What is the medicalization of culture about, and is it a good thing? What have been the results of the medicalization of sadness?

**Tues, Oct 5 | Session 7: Emotions and Culture Change**  
**NOTE DIFFERENT DAY**

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

Discussion questions: Are major changes in emotional culture occurring in the 21st century US? What is “informalization” all about?

**Wed, Oct 12 | Session 8: Culture Change and Prejudice**

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 9.

Discussion question: What are the cultural issues and complications in the #MeToo movement? Is it fair to impose new standards on past behaviors? Why has all this become a big deal in contemporary culture? Is American (or global) masculinity in crisis?

What is the nature of the furor over “critical race theory”? Are there other ways to approach the cultural issues involved in race relations?

**Wed, Oct 19 | Session 9: Mobilizing Culture Change**

- Due: second short paper: what does the gay rights movement suggest about mobilizing culture change? Would these “lessons” be applicable to current efforts to change race culture, or are the situations too different?

Discussion questions: How can culture change best be promoted? What is the international status of gay rights?

**Wed, Oct 26 | Session 10: Cultural Meaning of Nationalism**

Discussion questions: what is the culture of nationalism, and why did it, and does it, attract such strong emotions? what is distinctive about contemporary American culture?

**Wed, Nov 2 | Session 11: Student Topic Presentations**

*Written prospectus due, 500 words or so.*

**Wed, Nov 9 | Session 12: Culture Change, Contacts and Globalization**

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Ch. 8.
- **Discussion questions:** What are the plusses and minuses of cultural globalization? What are the alternatives? Should human rights standards be imposed on all cultures?

**Wed, Nov 16 | Session 13: Two (partly) Cultural Issues: Environment and Family**

Discussion questions: Is it possible to accelerate concerns about environmental change? Are there culture change techniques to apply here? To what extent is cultural change essential in dealing with environmental issues?

What are the current major issues in contemporary family culture—marriage, birth rate, etc.

Summing up: what kinds of factors cause significant cultural change?

- Peter Stearns, *Culture Change*, Conclusion.
- Sander L. van der Linden et. al, “The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change as a Gateway Belief: Experimental Evidence,”.
- Stearns, Peter. “A Decline of the Child?” March 6th, 2021. (available on blackboard)

**NOV 23- Nov 27 | THANKSGIVING RECESS**

**Wed, Nov. 30 | Session 14: Is American culture in deep crisis? Can an understanding of culture change contribute to current discussions?**

- Ross Douthat and Ezra Klein  Vox JUNE 17 2020; Joseph Hogan, Los Angeles Review of Books, Apr 1, 2020
Discussion questions: When did American culture begin to become more divisive, less functional? Is the idea of “crisis” appropriate? Are there some possible remedies?

**Take Home Final**** Dates TBA**

Appendix 1: Here are topics for the Session 4 Assignment. Three or maximum four students will work on one of these topics, communicating with each other before submitting (individually) a final paper; they can share research, ideas etc. Groups will be announced by end of Week 1.

1. What have been the cultural dimensions of the dispute over fluoridation of water? Are there any contemporary “lessons” in this?
2. How can the Me/Too movement be seen as a result of culture change?
3. What are the cultural issues in the decline of boxing (one of top spectator sports in US in 1900, with many amateurs as well)
4. What are the most striking recent changes in the role of religion in American culture?
5. What cultural emphases have (largely) replaced Marxism in Russia since 1990?
6. In 1750 if an American were to lie about is age, he or she would claim to be older than real age; in 1850, same scenario, would claim to be younger. How might this be explored as a topic in culture change?
7. Is Saudi Arabia attempting major culture change today?
8. One of the most striking features of modern societies is the low birth rate. Does the change from high to low (8 kids average to less than 2 average) have cultural implications?
9. Why do societies no longer shame offenders by putting them in public stocks?
10. What are the cultural dimensions of the growing attachment to pets in societies like the US, Japan?
11. Take a look at two recent international happiness polls: to what extent do national happiness levels reflect cultural differences, and not just differences in standards of living?
12. Why, over the past several decades, have many Americans believed that crime rates are higher than they actually are?
13. Is an effort to avoid crying an innate feature of masculinity?
14. What are three characteristics of a consumer culture?
15. Can the contemporary United States be described as a militaristic culture?
16. How might the desegregation of the US military be handled as a topic in culture change?

Many of these are big topics. Assumption is, each “team” will do a bit of online research on the topic chosen – not a deep dive – but particularly devote some thought to a sensible if tentative response. Each team should feel free to communicate with instructor at any stage. This is meant to be exploratory, fun, not exhaustive or exhausting. Do remember to emphasize the culture aspect – beliefs and values.

Students should send their preferred topics (ranked 1,2,3) to Stearns by Aug. 26; he will then make selections (can’t promise to honor preferences) and define teams accordingly, by Aug. 27. Students who do not specify choice will simply be assigned.