

Postmodernity and American Culture: Honours Course

Meetings: Mondays 18:00-20:00 in Periods A and B (once every 2 weeks)

Place: Padualaan 97 classroom to be announced

Teacher: Tomas Pollard, tomas.pollard@hu.nl

Using Uncivil Agreement by Lilliana Mason as a guide, we will explore how others define the American postmodern condition as a partisan divide not just seen in politics, but in unexpected places like consumer goods, lifestyles, religious views, TV shows, parenting styles, and neighborhoods. After examining the main claims of Mason, students will explore how postmodern aspects influence their own professional fields in and outside the US. As partisanship is a threat to democracy, we will also review Mason's theories on how to right the situation.

Testing: You will ask a few questions about American culture and try to answer them using academic and government sources. You will explore one or more issues that they will present either in 10-to-15 minute presentation, a 1000-1500 word research paper, or another agreed-upon product.

Here are some questions that will be explored:

- What are the sociological theories of postmodernity and demographic studies of contemporary American society?
- How do you and other people in postindustrial societies tend to find meaning in life?
- Why has social media made Americans more sorted into groups who view other groups as evil, distasteful, and/or repulsive?
- How many identities do you have, and are you unlike most Americans?
- Can we view the postmodern condition as "bad" or "good" and for whom?
- How is postmodernity related to the rise of white nationalism, the storming of the Capitol, the Trump presidency, and conspiracies?
- Can you do something to prevent political division and promote the civic good in postmodern times? Or, is it best to learn to live with it?
- What is the best research on social media's influence on politics, self-image, and political identities?

Materials: Readings and videos on Canvas.

Uncivil Agreement by Lilliana Mason. ISBN13: 9780226524542. One copy in library.

For more info, email Tomas Pollard, tomas.pollard@hu.nl.

Sign up for Research Topics in American Studies (OHON-RTAS-18) for the test in period B to take this course.

The course description is on Osiris



in English and Dutch.

Some quotes on the Postmodern Condition:

“What had happened over three decades (1974-2004) wasn’t a simple increase in political partisanship, but a more fundamental kind of self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division. The like-minded neighborhood supported the like-minded church, and both confirmed the image and beliefs of the tribe that lived and worshipped there. Americans were busy creating social resonators, and the hum that filled the air was the reverberated and amplified sound of their own voices and beliefs.” – journalist Bill Bishop in The Big Sort (2008)

“The fascinating thing is to travel through America as though it were the primitive society of the future, a society of complexity, hybridity, and the greatest intermingling, of a ritualism that is ferocious but whose superficial diversity lends it beauty, a society inhabited by a total metasocial fact with unforeseen consequences, whose immanence is breathtaking, yet lacking a past through which to reflect on this, and therefore fundamentally primitive” – French sociologist Jean Baudrillard in his philosophical travelogue America (1986)



“Last month the Pew Research Center released a poll showing that Americans are losing faith in their system of government. Only one-fifth of adults surveyed believe democracy is working “very well” in the United States, while two-thirds say “significant changes” are needed to governmental “design and structure.” The 2016 election is one explanation for these findings.

Something is not right in a country where Donald Trump is able to win the presidency.

But here’s another possibility: What if trust in American democracy is eroding because the nation has become too big to be effectively governed through traditional means? With a population of more than 325 million and an enormously complex society, perhaps this country has passed a point where — no matter whom we elect — it risks becoming permanently dissatisfied with legislative and governmental performance.”

--sociologist Neil Gross, “Is the United States too big to govern?” New York Times, May 11, 2018