

Project Two: Analysis of a Life in a Space

Dear Students,

Many thanks for doing terrific jobs in your first projects. Here is the second project.

For your second project you are asked to revisit your respective research sites, conduct observation and take notes as you did for your first paper. **Your task is to write a paper analyzing the content of the space, including the movement of people and events through the lens of both Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz.** Imagine that Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz visit your site and conduct the same research as you do. What do you think their analysis would look like? What kinds of questions might they ask? What different concepts and analytical tools might each use? What would they agree and disagree upon? In short, in this paper you are asked to apply the theories and methods of these two theorists in your analysis of the space and to the kinds of movements and events that take place during your observations. Having two thinkers to analyze the same space will help you to understand the distinct theoretical points of each.

I intentionally left a lot of room (power) to you to tailor it to suit your interests and liking. You set your goals and make choices regarding what you would like to concentrate on. Here are the steps to set goals and make the necessary choices:

(1) **Pick a topic** that brings the advantages of your material (your field notes) in alignment with your interest. You can choose to write about inequality, the relationship between the animate and inanimate, the rush hour, the lunch time crowd, inclusion/exclusion, social borders vs. physical ones, enclosures, front porches, social and other hierarchies of importance, commercialization of space, and other ideas that your field notes might evoke. Read your notes carefully. They are the key to everything. Without extensive notes this project is not possible.

(2) **Define the kind of paper** you want to write. The fact that you need to apply the analytical lens of two thinkers shapes your paper in conceptual and structural ways. Here are some suggestions, although far from exhaustive.

-- You might consider doing a comparative paper. This means that you give an equal weight to the two thinkers, and examine the ways in which they attend to the same problem or question from their respective theories.

-- You can use one more extensively while using the second as a foil against whom you highlight the ideas of the first. For instance, if Geertz really helps you to do a thick description of a phenomenon that puzzles you (i.e. people tend to congregate on this side of the street and not on the other; or there is a relative absence of people on a block that is crowded with all sorts of buildings), then apply his theory and method. Use the other thinker (in this case Foucault) to indicate why Geertz was a better choice for this particular analysis. For instance, tell how Foucault would have illuminated the issue and what would have he left out, or have done differently, and why.

-- **You can write your paper in a form of a debate between Geertz and Foucault.** What would they want to argue about your block? Who would win the debate? Why? Do you think you could intervene and make suggestions to both thinkers about the advantages and flaws in their theories?

(3) You are also required to engage with at least two readings from our course in addition to Geertz and Foucault. This is not to make your life more difficult. Quite the contrary, once you engage with some of the writers who have done what you are asked to do, you will automatically find your argument. That is how most scholarly articles are written. They respond to what other anthropologists have done before by agreeing, disagreeing, and mostly by enriching, tweaking, and expanding on others' work. You can easily imagine that without referring to previous research, scholars would end up talking past each other, reinventing the wheel, and never being able to build on each other's discoveries and accomplishments.

(4) Your papers should contain all the parts that make an analytical paper. It should have an argument, appropriate ethnographic descriptions that help to illuminate your point and encompass complexity, and a conclusion that both strives to address the complexity and reaffirms your argument in an in-depth manner.

Here is an example of a complex argument by Caldeira, whose article we read for the class. Caldeira concludes her paper with the following argument. (I paraphrase it here). The young men in Sao Paulo are engaged in the act of resistance through their specific forms of mobility and creation of visual display. Through them they assert their presence in the city that marginalize them. When viewed within the context of these men's marginalization and oppression, their acts of resistance are legitimate and justified. However, they are also disruptive when we look at them within the larger context of the city that is striving to become more secure and democratic. Instead of improving democratization and opening the city to diversification, these men end up amplifying the sense of danger and thus contribute to the fragmentation and inequality of Sao Paulo in a new way beyond the existing inequality between rich and poor.

Galdeira's argument is complex because (1) she explores the contradiction within a phenomenon; (2) she looks at the meaning of these men's actions in at least two different contexts; (3) she also considers the consequences of the action for different actors (the men themselves, the city dwellers, administration, and even for the upper-class that is stuck inside their homes; (4) she compares different modes and styles of resistance such as visual and mobile forms of disruption and assertion of a presence.

We do not expect you to do Galdeira or Geertz level analysis. (If you do, that is great!) Mainly, we do not want you to stick to a simple, obvious, and boring argument. Try to look further and find out how some phenomenon might encompass additional meanings and repercussions for a variety of actors and at different times and contexts, if possible.

Your papers should be six double-spaced pages, font 12 Times New Roman or Garamond, have appropriate citations, bibliography, and copies of your raw field notes. Papers are due two days after session 14 by 10 am.

We will supply information for proper citation and we will have a workshop on using secondary sources that will really help you to feel like a pro next week or the following. Please let us know if you have any questions. We are happy to help and wanted to remind you that your drafts and questions before the due date do not figure into the grade. So, use the resources wisely.

Good luck.
Teaching team

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.01 How Culture Works
Fall 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.