

Week 2: Does culture matter? What is culture?

The following questions are intended to guide you through the readings by drawing your attention to the important points in each text. You do not have to turn in responses. HOWEVER, the answers to the reading questions every week will be VERY useful to you as you work on that week's reflection paper assignment. You are therefore strongly encouraged to use them.

Philippe Bourgois, "Understanding inner-city poverty: resistance and self-destruction under U.S. apartheid" (2002)

1. What explanations does Bourgois offer for the behavior of the crack dealers in his study?
2. Are these forces mutually exclusive or do they interact? If they interact, how do they do so?
3. How do cultural anthropologists study their subjects? What are the advantages of this methodology according to Bourgois? What are some pitfalls?

Catherine Lutz & Jane Collins, "A world brightly different: photographic conventions 1950-1986" (1993)

1. What is Lutz & Collins' central argument? What functions do the photographs printed in the National Geographic accomplish?
2. How do the photographs perform these functions?

Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" (1965)

1. Explain what Geertz means by the following phrases: "Seek simplicity and distrust it" and "Seek complexity and order it."
2. What is Geertz's critique of the Enlightenment view of a man? What is he proposing instead? Why?
3. What is the notion of cultural universals? Can you cite examples? What are the problems in using and/or thinking with cultural universals?
4. Explain the notion of cultural particularities.

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5. Elaborate on what Geertz means by the following: "One of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one."
6. Where is the place of culture in the evolution of man? How does Geertz explain this?

Laura Bohannon, "Shakespeare in the Bush" (1966)

1. How does Laura Bohannon's findings on the Tiv's understanding of Hamlet relate to Geertz's notion on cultural particularities and to his critique on the Enlightenment view of men?
2. What were the main disagreements between the author and the Tivs?
3. What do you learn about the differences between Tiv and British culture and the similarities between them? Give details regarding life after death, family organization, power and hierarchy, and cultural categories that each uses to make their points.

Rubin Caroline, "Writing Against MIT Culture" (2008)

1. Compare, in detail, different versions of MIT culture from outside the institute and from inside.
2. Why is the paper entitled "Writing against culture?"
3. Relate the author's arguments to Geertz's notion of cultural particulars.

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21A.01 How Culture Works
Fall 2012

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