CONF 720: ETHNIC AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Spring 2012 (Section 621)
School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University
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Course Description

This course explores the role of culture in the genesis, structuring, and resolution of conflict within and between groups. We will pay special attention to ethnicity and other markers of identity in complex social systems as both generators and outcomes of conflict. Analysis will proceed through consideration of case-studies drawn from a variety of cultural and social settings. We will also discuss some critiques of the culture concept with reference to third party roles in conflict analysis and resolution.

The goal of the course is to introduce students to the importance of understanding culture and social identity dynamics, in addition to material, structural and institutional factors, for the analysis of social conflict and the possibilities for ethical conflict resolution across cultural boundaries.

The first week of the course will focus on different approaches to “culture” as an analytical concept. Towards the end of the first week we’ll move to consider culture as an “archive” or resource for the formation of political identities in situations of conflict, using Marc Howard Ross’s book as a source of theory as well as case studies. (Liisa Malkki’s book treats a similar theme in greater case-depth. Given time constraints I’ve made this reading “optional,” though I urge you to read it at some point in your course work.) At the very end we’ll bring the two – cultural analysis and cultural performance – together as part of a discussion of power and ethics in the practice of conflict resolution by third parties.

Course Requirements

Readings

The Mason Library E-reserve password for this course (CONF 720 [621]) is: language


Optional, Recommended:


(Note that the reading is fairly light the first week and then gets heavier the second. I urge you to adjust your own reading schedule in acknowledgment of this.)

The requirements of this course are as follows:

1. In the second week, in self-selected groups of 3-4, you will choose EITHER one case from Ross’s book: (a) Israel-Palestine; (b) Northern Ireland; (c) Catalan-Spain; (d) Islamic headscarves-France; (e); Post-Apartheid South Africa; (f) Flag Controversy in the U.S. South, OR (e) any other conflict case you
mutually agree to (let me know beforehand). You will present the case in class, accompanied by a joint-authored written analysis of 1500-1750 words. (40%)

2. A single-authored paper presenting and analyzing any case but the one you presented previously. (This can come from Ross’s book or some other case you are interested in.) The paper should be around 2500-2750 words, due (via email) to me on March 30, 2012. (50%)

3. Class participation. (10%)

Course Program

Part I: Culture


Tuesday Feb 28 How to Study Culture? Read: Avruch, “Culture”

Wednesday Feb 29 How Not to Study Culture Read: Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations” Avruch, “Culture Theory, Culture Clash…”

Thursday March 1 Culture as Communication, Culture as Context Read: Cohen, “Limits of English” and “A Middle East Lexicon”

Part II: Culture, Ethnicity & Other Identities

Friday March 2 Social Identities and Symbolic Politics Read: Black, “Identities” Kaufman, from Modern Hatreds Optional, Malkki, pp. 1-104

Monday March 3 Psychocultural Dramas, Narratives, and the Performance of Identity: Theory Read: Ross, pp. 1-87 Optional, Malkki, pp. 105-196

Tuesday March 4 Fighting with Culture: Language, the State, Religion, Case Studies I (First Groups present) Read: Ross: pp. 88-223 Optional, Malkki, pp. 197-258
**Wednesday March 5**
Seeking Resolution of Identity Conflicts, or Reversion to Violence: Case Studies II (Second Groups present)
Read: Ross, pp. 224-328
Optional, Malkki, pp. 259-297

**Part III: Cautions and Critiques**

**Thursday March 6**
Cultural Relativism and Dilemmas of Power: Misusing Culture in Conflict Analysis and Resolution
Read: Avruch, “Type and Type II Errors…” and “Culture, Relativism, and Human Rights”

**Friday March 7**
Loose Ends, Course Review, and Individual Consultations