William Degenaro: Rhetorics Of Social Class

Prof. Bill DeGenaro

Course Texts:

James Arnt Aune, Rhetoric and Marxism
Julie Lindquist, A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar
Sherry Lee Linkon, ed., Teaching Working Class
Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics
Mike Rose, The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker
J. Elspeth Stuckey, The Violence of Literacy
Michael Zweig, The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret

Class Matters:

Though the meaning and impact of class remains hotly contested, "social class" denotes a meaningful identity marker. Class refers at times to an economic category (one might claim membership in the mythic "middle class" due to, say, her $45,000 annual salary) and at times to a cultural affiliation (another person calls himself "working class" because of his lifestyle and leisure-time pursuits) and at times to an extension of occupation (the individual who self-describes as a "professional" because she is an attorney with autonomy and agency in the workplace). Of course these categories overlap and blur.

Cultural mythology in the U.S. suggests that class is largely non-existent or irrelevant or strictly a private matter. Why bother talking about class in a land of equal opportunity and social mobility? Popular media rarely acknowledges the diversity of social classes (except in voyeuristic news reports about the extremely poor and entertainment representations of the extremely rich) or the distinct nature of particular classes (except to draw caricatures of archetypes like the working-class bigot).

Yet sociologists tell us that class matters a great deal, affecting in fundamental ways our lifestyles, our opportunities, our quality of life, the quantity and quality of our education, our healthfulness, even our longevity and mortality. So we all ought to think about class.

Class and Rhetoric/Composition

Class should matter a great deal to those of us who are students of rhetoric. Scholars of rhetoric have long been concerned with how language and other symbolic systems might be used purposefully in the material world. As a burgeoning academic field, rhetoric and composition canonized a mythic "rhetorical tradition" of writers, teachers, and thinkers who attempted to articulate the dynamic uses of oral and literate behaviors. Since this tradition neglected various
marginalized groups and ideologies, rhetoricians have begun to seek out other rhetorical traditions and have changed "rhetoric" to "rhetorics" in order to stress pluralism. Scholars interested in issues of gender and sexuality have identified feminist and queer rhetorics. Race-conscious scholars in the field, similarly, have mapped out complex rhetorics of race. And turning to theories of class and mass culture as well as "alternative" rhetorical traditions, some in the field have begun to consider rhetorics of social class.

Teachers and practitioners engaged in domains that facilitate class consciousness have long been concerned with class. Teaching at an open-access institution or two-year college, for example, involves thinking about how best to serve working-class students. Carrying out ethnographic or action research in diverse locales involves consideration of how class interacts with other socially constructed markers to constitute identity. Finally, cultural critics and scholars of cultural and mass media studies draw on critical theories of class to help them understand concepts as fundamental as ideology and hegemony.

In this class, we will consider intersections of theories of class and theories of rhetoric, reading together theorists like James Arnt Aune, Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, George Lukacs, and Theodor Adorno. We will also think about social class in the contexts of the workplace, the community, the college campus, and the classroom. We will consider literacy through a class-conscious lens, reading scholars such as Mike Rose and Elspeth Stuckey. With the help of writers like Lynn Bloom, Marc Bousquet, Sharon Crowley, Donald Lazer, and Richard Ohmann, we will analyze the composition classroom as a site of class conflict. And aided by emerging thinkers Lew Caccia and Julie Lindquist—who will both address our class this term—we will think about how we might intervene in broader community contexts as class-conscious rhetoricians.

Requirements:

Attendance & Participation:

Regular attendance and engaged participation are required. As with most graduate courses, rigorous discussion of readings, course concepts, and your own projects comprise the heart of English 733. It is important that we read generously-seeking to understand purpose, audience, and context—all the while critiquing guiding assumptions, methods, and analyses. Responsibilities to Peers: Read each other's work and make substantive and timely comments. You will share virtually everything you write this term, so be accountable to one another and help each other as thinkers, readers, and writers.

Written Work:

• Complete a total of three reader-response papers of two-to-three pages each. We will use these responses as the basis for class discussion. Reader
responses should offer a brief summary of the reading, respond critically to the ideas presented in the text, and pose questions about the text you would like the class to discuss. These responses need not be formal essays. They should help focus and deepen class discussions by helping us to understand, critique, or connect readings. Know that the genre is open-ended, though, and you may argue against a reading, explain how the reading extends or challenges an idea from a previous reading or class discussion, or offer a cumulative response to several readings. On weeks when you have a reader-response due, post your response to our blackboard site by Monday at Noon. You should also print out a copy to bring to class. All members of the class should read your response before coming to class and use your response as an in-road for thinking about the reading. To get to blackboard, go to My Miami (mymiami.muohio.edu), log in, and then click on "blackboard." Your responses should be posted in the "assignments" folder.

- Write a research proposal of three-five pages that lays out an idea for your seminar paper. The proposal should define the issue, problem, question, or controversy that you wish to address in your paper. You should also articulate a tentative line of argument that your paper will follow, explaining what kind of primary and secondary sources you will utilize in the paper. Begin in the proposal to situate your paper within current scholarship in the field. Finally, explain who specifically your audience will be for the paper, why you chose that audience, and in what venue you will attempt to publish the paper. We will workshop drafts of your proposals in class on February 9, so please bring five copies on that day. Final drafts of proposals will be due on February 16.

- Write multiple drafts of a seminar paper, geared toward publication in one of our field's leading journals. Because our field is interdisciplinary and because the critical study of social class draws on multiple fields, you have wide latitude in choosing a paper topic. All I ask is that you explore a topic related to the rhetorics of class. You may write about an historical figure, tradition, or cultural moment from a rhetorical standpoint. You may explore a theoretical question from any number of perspectives. You might explore a teaching question or teaching problem through the lens of a particular class theory. You might write about concerns associated with teaching students from a particular social class. You might engage in ideological or institutional critique. You might explore the art and aesthetics of class. You may choose to engage with popular culture or the mass media to analyze representations of social class. Feel free to draw on our readings or the texts listed on the supplemental bibliography I have provided. Begin thinking about potential topics immediately. Use me and your classmates as sounding boards during class. Finally, know that I am more than happy to listen to your ideas and provide feedback early in the process. We will workshop drafts of your papers during the final three weeks of class. A final draft is due at our final meeting-celebration, which will be held at my home during finals week. Day,
time, and menu tba. At this last meeting, I will ask you to give a short (five-ten minutes or so) presentation of your paper.

Evaluation:

Reader-Responses  25%
Research Proposal  25%
Seminar Paper  50%

Schedule:

January 12  Introductions

Aesthetics & Elitism: Theories of Class Part I

January 19  Read  Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture"
Beech, "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse..."

January 26  Read  Hebdidge, from Subculture
Benjamin, "Author as Producer"
Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society"
LeBesco, "Citizen Profane..."

Marxism: Theories of Class Part II

February 2  Read  Marx, from German Ideology
February 9  Read  Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness("Preface," "What is Orthodox Marxism," "Class Consciousness," and "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat")

February 16  Read  Aune, Rhetoric and Marxism
Rhetorics of the Workplace
February 23  Read  Caccia, "Workplace Risk Communication..."
Rose, The Mind at Work, pp. 1-99
Guest Lecture: Lew Caccia, Kent State University

March 2  Read  Rose, The Mind at Work, pp. 100-216
March 9  Read  Zweig, The Working-Class Majority

Social Class and Literacy
March 23  Read  Stuckey, The Violence of Literacy
Bernstein, "Social Class, Language and Socialization"
Bernstein, "Class and Pedagogies"
O'Dair, "Class Work"
March 30  Read  Bloom, "Freshman Composition as Middle-Class..."
Soliday, "Class Dismissed"
Crowley, "The Bourgeois Subject..."
Ohmann, "Advanced Placement..."
Seitz, "Making Work Visible"

Critiquing Our Own Work: Class, Classroom & Community
April 6      Read  Lazere, "Class Conflict"
Zebroski, "The English Department..."
Harris, "Meet the New Boss..."
Beech and Lindquist, "The Work Before Us..."
Bousquet, "Tenured Bosses"
Bousquet, "The Rhetoric of the Job Market"

April 13     Read  Lindquist, "Class Affects..."
Linkon, Teaching Working Class ("Working-Class Students," pp. 15-141)
Workshop drafts of seminar papers

April 20     Read  Lindquist, A Place to Stand
Guest Speaker: Julie Lindquist, Michigan State University
Workshop drafts of seminar papers
April 27     Wrap up discussions
Workshop drafts of seminar papers

Finals week  Meet at my place for end-of-term celebration for food and mini-presentations of your papers

Supplemental Readings:


Harris, Joseph. "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition." *CCC* 52 (2000): 43-68.


