CLASS AND CULTURE

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Course website: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/9449

Course Overview

It is commonplace to note that in the United States a large portion of the population self-identifies as “middle class” even though our society is marked by deep, persistent, and increasing class inequality. This incongruity between identity and social structure betrays the complex and often contradictory ways in which we experience social class in our everyday lives. This course explores the subjective experience of social class in the U.S. from an ethnographic perspective, focusing on the everyday lives and cultures of ordinary Americans. We will consider questions such as the following. What is it like to be a working class person in a society heavily invested in ideals of individual achievement and meritocracy? How do educational institutions such as high schools and colleges underwrite class mobility for some and reproduce disadvantage for others? What kinds of class cultures are cultivated in elite colleges such as Harvard? The first unit considers the identities of working class people before and after the Great Recession, examining how blue color workers imagine their place in an increasingly unequal world. In the second unit we will focus on how attending an elite public university shapes the class trajectories of working class and upper middle class female students. For the third unit students will develop their own original research project concerning the role played by class divisions on elite college campuses. The course readings are drawn mainly from the social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology.

An equally important goal of the course is to develop your ability to write clear, engaging, and coherent analytical essays of the sort you will be asked to produce frequently at Harvard. With this in mind the class is structured to give you the opportunity to work in a sustained and systematic way on improving your writing. During the semester you will write three essays, each of which tackles a different aspects of the experience of class and is designed to highlight different writing skills. The thematic units and their associated writing assignments are described below.
ESSAY I: WORKING CLASS IDENTITIES BEFORE AND AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION
(comparative analysis essay, 5-6 pages)

For the first unit, we’ll read two rich and evocative studies of working class identity in the U.S. — Michele Lamont’s *The Dignity of Working Men* and Jennifer Silva’s *Coming Up Short*. Lamont’s research focuses on the identities of blue collar men in New Jersey during the 1990s. Silva documents how working class people in Massachusetts and Virginia cope with declining opportunities and standards of living in the wake of the Great Recession. Students will compare these two working class groups and make an argument about what the comparison tells us about the nature of working class life in the contemporary U.S.

*Focal Writing Skills:* Devising questions and arguable theses; using evidence; integrating sources.

ESSAY II: CLASS INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL CLUBS ON CAMPUS
(comparative analysis essay, 6-7 pages)

For the second unit we’ll read *Paying for the Party*, which argues that women’s participation in “the party pathway” at a large public university tends to reinforce the class privilege of affluent students while leading to downward mobility for working class students. Students will then consider the question of whether the Finals Clubs at Harvard constitute a parallel “party pathway” with similar effects in terms of reproducing inequality.

*Focal Writing Skills:* Comparative analysis; presentation of evidence and analysis; argument structure; counterargument.

ESSAY III: RESEARCH ESSAY: CLASS ON CAMPUS
(multi-source research essay, 8-10 pages)

Elite educational institutions such as Harvard play a complex role in the class structure. On the one hand, many view attending such institutions as an important means of class mobility and of increasing the dynamism of the class structure. Other commentators have emphasized the role of elite educational institutions in reproducing and reinforcing class privilege. In this unit students will devise their own research project concerning the significance of class on the Harvard campus. For inspiration, students will read Khan’s excellent ethnography *Privilege: The Making of An Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*.

*Focal Writing Skills:* Research; handling of multiple sources and different kinds of evidence; structure.
Class and Culture

Course Readings

• The following books are available at the Coop:


• *Course Reader*: The course readings will be posted in PDF form on the course website, here: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/9449

• *Other resources*:

- Models essays from Exposé
  http://www.jhcwp.com/
- *Harvard University Guide to Using Sources* website, here:
  http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu

How the Course Works

The main goal for the course is for you to produce an original, compelling, and analytically sound essay for each of the three units of the course. Such essays are not written on the fly; they take time, continual re-working, and critical reflection. The writing requirements outlined below are designed to provide you with the techniques for constructing good essays.

Class time will be split between grappling with the course readings and in-class work directed at improving some aspect of your writing. You should come to class with the relevant readings completed and ready to participate actively in discussion.

Writing and Revising

• *Response Papers*: Before you compose an initial draft of each essay, you'll complete one or more response papers that focus on particular writing skills that are important for the relevant essay type. Check the unit assignment packet for specific instructions and due dates, etc.

• *Drafts*: You will submit a draft of each of the three essays. On each draft you’ll receive detailed comments from the instructor (in writing and in conferences).
• Draft Cover Letters: Every time you hand in a draft, you'll include a cover letter in which you provide guidance to your reader about the aspects of the essay you are struggling with in addition to whatever other comments or questions you might have. I'll give you more specific instructions about writing draft cover letters over the course of the semester.

• Draft Workshops: Immediately after each draft is due we'll have an in-class draft workshop in which we work through two student papers (chosen by the instructor) and offer the writers constructive criticisms and suggestions for improvement. I will email you the essays I have chosen before each workshop. You will be expected to provide written comments (in the form of a letter) on each draft that we workshop together. I'll hand out more guidelines on draft workshops later in the semester.

• Conferences: After I've carefully read your draft, we'll meet for a 15-20 minute conference in which we'll work together on strategies for revising the essay. You should also plan on taking notes during the conference. Missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

• Essay Revisions: You should expect to extensively revise each of your drafts before submitting it for a grade. I will provide written comments on essay revisions. Essay revisions must be submitted over email (not as hard copies), and I will also provide my comments in electronic form.

Other Policies

• Grading: I will grade only the revisions (that is, the last version) of your essays, not the drafts or response papers (although I may suggest, as an aid to interpreting my evaluations, what sort of grade a draft would receive if I were to grade it). Course grades will be determined as follows:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 2</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 3</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<td>Participation and exercises</td>
<td>5%</td>
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Grading will become more stringent as the semester progresses since I expect you develop as a thinker and writer. Please be advised that final grades (that is, grades on revised essays) are indeed final. I will not read or grade a further revision of a revision.

• Attendance: The policy of the Harvard College Writing Program is as follows: If you miss more than one class without the excuse of a religious holiday or illness, you will receive a formal warning letter, copied to your Freshman Dean. If you then miss
another class without a legitimate excuse, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. Please note that absences to participate in athletic or other extracurricular activities are not excusable. If you have to be absent for a religious holiday or other important event, please speak to me before the date you will be away.

• **Deadlines:** We are on a very tight schedule, so it is imperative that you submit work on time. I will only accept late work if the student contacts me to request an extension in advance of the deadline and has a compelling reason. Otherwise late work will receive a significant grade penalty.

• **Completion of Work:** The policy of the Harvard College Writing Program is as follows: You must complete all three of the required courses essays (including drafts) in order to pass the course. All work must be completed by the relevant deadline unless you have made prior arrangements with me for an extension. If you then miss the extended deadline, you may be excluded from the course.

• **Collaboration Among Students:** The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students, and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, “You do not need to acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts, or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

• **Academic Honesty:** All work submitted for this course must be your own work. Any outside sources you use must be cited properly. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and will be referred to the college’s Administrative Board for further disciplinary action, including expulsion from the university. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, consult the relevant sections of *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* and/or speak with the instructor.