Work: Culture, Power, and Control

Monday and Wednesday at 12:00
CGIS Knafel, Room K108

Instructor: Rachel Meyer
Email: meyer2@fas.harvard.edu
Writing Program Office: 1 Bow Street, Room 230
Sociology Department Office: William James Hall, Room 409
Mailbox: 1 Bow Street

Course Overview

This course explores the structure and experience of work in the contemporary political economy with an eye toward both its liberating and oppressive potential. We will take up enduring sociological questions with respect to power, control, autonomy, surveillance and self-determination on the job. How do different forms of work affect our life circumstances, personalities, and connections to each other? In the first unit we will examine corporate culture and how it affects the experience of professional work. Does a strong corporate culture enhance professional autonomy or management’s power? Does it facilitate or undermine community? In unit two we explore the crucial issue of workers’ control over their own labor and the concept of alienation. We examine accounts of deskilling, the separation of mental and manual labor, and the consequences of these processes for workers’ experience on the job. To what extent does alienation occur in offices versus factories versus service counters? For the final unit we will critically engage in a debate about the development of “flexible” labor and the ways in which workers’ connections to employers, occupations, and locations have become more fluid and transitory. We will explore what flexibility means in a variety of contexts and ask: does flexibility lead to liberation or loss of identity? Does it bring self-fulfillment or insecurity? What does flexibility mean for tech workers in Silicon Valley and bankers on Wall Street? Our texts consist of case studies and ethnographic accounts representing a variety of workplaces along with readings from prominent social theorists who in different ways seek to elucidate the conditions of work under modern capitalism.
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 tackles a different aspect of work in the modern world and is designed to highlight particular writing skills. The thematic units and their associated writing assignments are described below.

UNIT 1: PROFESSIONALS AND CORPORATE CULTURE
Assignment: Critical Review (5-6 pages)
Writing Focus: Asking analytical questions; evaluating arguments; constructing theses and arguments; using evidence; introductions.

In the first unit we will explore what it means to have a “strong” corporate culture and how it affects professionals’ experience on the job. We will examine how corporate culture relates to community, autonomy, surveillance, and motivation at work. Does it enhance power and control for professionals or for management? We will incorporate classic texts on the topic including C. Wright Mills’ White Collar and Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s Men and Women of the Corporation. For the paper students will do a close reading of Engineering Culture, Gideon Kunda’s study of a high-tech corporation, and explore the various ways in which corporate culture affects the experience of professional work.

UNIT 2: ALIENATION AND CONTROL
Assignment: Test a Theory (6-7 pages)
Writing Focus: Counterargument; analysis of evidence; thesis; structure.

In unit two we will examine Marx’s concept of alienation and his ideas about the creative potential for work and its role in human fulfillment and wellbeing. We will read Harry Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital which explores of the conditions of work under modern capitalism which examines routinization, deskilling, control on the job, and the dynamics of conflict and consent in the workplace. For the paper students will treat either David Halle’s America’s Working Man, an ethnography of chemical workers in New Jersey, or Robin Leidner’s Fast Food, Fast Talk, which includes an ethnographic account of working at McDonalds, and use one of these texts to critically assess the theory of alienation as found in Marx and Braverman.
UNIT 3: FLEXIBLE LABOR

Assignment: Research Essay (7-9 pages)

Writing Focus: Research; case study; handling multiple sources and different kinds of evidence; comparing arguments.

Unit three explores the ways in which workers’ connections to employers, occupations, and locations have become more fluid and transitory. We will critically engage in the debate about the social and personal consequences of such “flexible” labor. How do cases of various jobs, occupations, workplaces, industries, companies, organizations, technologies and employment practices bear on our understanding of the flexibility of work? Students will read a variety of perspectives on the topic and will then devise their own research project. Student papers will revolve around case studies with the goal of using primary data to make a meaningful scholarly intervention.

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. Readings will be available on the course website.

Writing and Revising

• Response Papers:
Before you compose an initial draft of each essay, you’ll complete one or more assignments that focus on particular writing skills that are important for the relevant essay type.

• 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. You will receive more specific instructions about writing cover letters.

**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 criticism and suggestions for improvement. You will be expected to provide written comments, in the form of a letter, on each draft that we workshop together. You will receive more guidelines on draft workshops.

**Conferences:**
After I’ve carefully read your draft, we’ll meet for a 20-minute conference in which we’ll work together on strategies for revising the essay. You should plan on taking notes during the conference.

**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.

**Course Policies**

**Writing Program Policy on Attendance:**

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.
• **Writing Program Policy on Completion of Work:**
  Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of
the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule
of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind.
You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail
to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay
unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late
work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial
draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem,
you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

• **Grading:**
  I will grade only the revisions (that is, the last version) of your essays, not the drafts.
  Course grades will be determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 2</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 3</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  Grading will become more stringent as the semester progresses since I expect you to
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.

Certain course activities will not be graded directly: response papers, drafts, cover
letters, in-class discussions, conferences, responses to fellow students’ writing.
These activities and assignments are nonetheless required since the quality of your
work and your level of engagement in these areas will have a direct bearing on how
well you will do on the final revisions of your essays.

• **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.

• **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,
“Students need not 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 Integrity:**
Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

• **Electronic Devices:**
Students are not permitted to use electronic devices—including laptops, tablets, or cell phones—during class.

**Resources**

• Model essays from *Exposé*: http://www.jhcwp.com
• The *Harvard College Writing Center* is available to assist at any stage of the writing process. Students can schedule an appointment with a writing tutor or attend drop-in office hours: https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu.

If you have any problems—understanding the material, attendance, completing assignments, etc.—contact the instructor as soon as possible. If I know about problems ahead of time we will be better able to solve them.