THE CENTER FOR PLACE CULTURE AND POLITICS

2011-2012 Seminar
HOW TO FIGHT: TRANSFORMATIONAL POLITICS AND CULTURE

Student Fellows

Ujju Aggarwal, Anthropology
The Productive Work of Public Education in Relationship to Inequality in the United States

Harmony Goldberg, Anthropology
The Making of the Service Working Class: Contested Class Relations Among Domestic Workers in New York City

Jesse Goldstein, Sociology
Planetary Improvement: Green (Beyond?) Capitalism

Carwil James, Anthropology
Claiming Space, Redefining Politics: Urban Protest and Grassroots Power in Bolivia

Fiona Lee, English
The Spectral Communist

Marisa Lerer, art History
30,000 Reasons to Remember: Patronage and Artistic Strategies for Memorializing Argentina’s Disappeared

David Spataro, Earth and Environmental Sciences
Decommodified Survival: Direct Action Services and the Politics of Social Reproduction in New York City

Jesse Swartz, English
Genetic Revolutionaries: American Socialism, the Russian Revolution, and the Production of the Radical Immigrant, 1873-1929

Faculty Fellows

Jonathon Gray, Assistant Professor of English, John Jay College and the Graduate Center
Fighting with Re-Memory: Transformational Politics in the Graphic Narratives Footnotes in Gaza and Waltz with Bashir

Samantha Majic, Assistant Professor of Political Science, John Jay College and Government, Cornell University
Protest by other Means? Sex Workers, Social Movement Evolution and the Political Possibilities of Nonprofit Service Provision

Shehzad Nadeem, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Lehman College
The Fugue of Globalization

Costas Panayotakis, Associate Professor of Sociology, New York City College of Technology
The Politics of Economic Democratization

Charity Scriber, Assistant Professor of English, LaGuardia Community College
Transformational Politics and Culture after the German Autumn: Toward a Postmilitant Critique

Robyn Spencer, Assistant Professor of History, Lehman College
No Justice, No Peace: Black Liberation Politics and the Movement Against the Vietnam War

Jeanne Theoharis, Professor of Political Science, Brooklyn College
A Life History of Being Rebellious: The Radicalism of Rosa Parks
ABSTRACT:
As starting point of my dissertation, this chapter-length study focuses on the relationship between rights-based movements and State-driven reform projects, and attempts to chart the current political terrain concerning public education by looking backwards. Two questions are central to this investigation: 1) how have right-based claims related to public education been incorporated by State-driven reform projects within the past thirty years, and to what consequence?; and 2) what has been the role of education in the imaginary of social justice movements, and what (if anything) has shifted over time? I build upon the work that has looked at both of these questions. However most of this work has addressed one of these questions in isolation from the other. This study seeks to examine them together, thus offering insights concerning the relationship between the State and right-based struggles more broadly, as well as to the particular sector of public education.
The Making of the Service Working Class: 
Contested Class Relations Among Domestic Workers in New York City 

_Harmony Goldberg_

**Project Abstract:** My research will provide a case study of an organization of domestic workers in New York City – Domestic Workers United – in order to explore the innovative political demands that are developing within the service working classes. DWU recently won a ground-breaking victory through the passage of the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which will provide protections for domestic workers who have been historically excluded from labor protections. The Bill of Rights not only overcame historic exclusions; it advanced a vision for expanded labor rights by requiring the state to directly mandate worker protections that - in other industries - would be secured through collective bargaining. This victory offers an extension of the vision for workers rights that is emerging within the new labor movements. My research will thus provide an evocative case study of an immigrant workers’ struggle that has important implications for broader contestations over class relations.
Planetary Improvement:
Green (Beyond?) Capitalism

Abstract:

There is a growing consensus that industrial capitalism has precipitated global climate change, and that this poses a dire threat to humanity. Responses have split between those arguing for revolution, on the assumption that capitalism can never be green, and those advocating for reforms, on the assumption that green capitalism can, and must, be possible. This project takes a critical look at the ideas and practices of green capitalism, so as to unearth kernels of non-reformist reform within this field. I conduct a discourse analysis of popular non-fiction texts advocating for various forms of green capitalism, and an ethnographic case study of investors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and engineers attempting to put principles of green capitalism into practice. These individuals are experimenting, in thought and practice, with a wide range of new techno-social configurations and are actively grappling with the ways in which the infrastructure of global capitalism has irrevocably shaped world ecology. It is my contention that calls for green capitalism often harbor really radical desires to produce decidedly non-capitalist economies, albeit voiced within a discourse that has collapsed the gulf between capitalism and economy, implicitly presenting the former as a naturalized form of the latter. By critically examining the ideas and practices emerging from this field, my research explores the changing natures of capitalism, as well as the changing natures of what it will take to successfully transform the world in substantively just, humane and eco-centric ways.
—ABSTRACT—

The Center for Place, Culture and Politics fellowship will facilitate the drafting of my dissertation on space-claiming practices by indigenous and urban popular movements in Bolivia, while considering them as an example of effective, if contradictory, resistance to neoliberalism. Indigenous movements’ political thought—their critique of power and inequality, innovation of forms of self-organization, and demands for local autonomy—has been critical to the national upsurge, including in Bolivian cities. Indigenous cultural knowledge has shaped these mobilizations and served as one of their greatest weapons.

My dissertation argues that social movements’ appropriation of Bolivia’s central physical, political, and symbolic spaces both justifies and embodies the political changes they demand. While the long-term impact of these protests remains uncertain, the movements involved have integrated themselves into national decisionmaking, enshrined mass mobilization as a continuing part of politics, and maintained an independent capacity to challenge the government they brought to power.
Project Abstract

The Spectral Communist

My project examines *The Last Communist* (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir), a semi-musical documentary film, which challenges the official state history of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), during which communist insurgents engaged in guerilla warfare against the British Commonwealth army. The film performs a critique of the state’s ethno-nationalist discourse of the Malayan Communist Party’s role in the struggle for independence. I argue that the film’s experiments with genre as well as the conditions of its production and circulation—its ban at home and its circulation abroad—raises important questions about the production of national cultural memory that are pertinent to theorizing the practice of imagining community in the era of contemporary globalization. I also consider how emergent forms of expression require thinking modes of historical production as well as the relation between aesthetics and politics anew.
Marisa Lerer
The Center for Place Culture and Politics
2011-2011 Graduate Fellow Application

30,000 Reasons to Remember:
Patronage & Artistic Strategies for Memorializing Argentina’s Disappeared

Abstract:
Argentina experienced a period of State-sponsored terrorism from 1976-1983 during which the military dictatorship kidnapped and murdered an estimated 30,000 people now known as the disappeared. The perplexity of memorializing the disappeared, whose existence was denied in the Argentine military junta’s official history, generates questions on memory, history, and national identity. This dissertation examines the Argentine memorials (in all media) created from 1976 to the present dedicated to the disappeared. A study of the memorials’ patronage groups: human rights organizations, cultural institutions, and the Argentine government, their chosen artistic strategies, and the targeted audience reveals the sponsors’ political goals. Through a lens of social history and interviews with the memorials’ audience members, artists, and human rights organizations, I unpack the role that memorials plays in re-telling Argentina’s history of the dictatorship. Issues that this dissertation addresses include site specificity in public art, memorials as a political platform, and conflicts in the memorialization debate.
Decommodified Survival: Direct action services and the politics of social reproduction in New York City

Project Abstract: In New York City several autonomously organized activist groups work to pry basic survival away from the marketplace. Their fight against the neoliberal tendency to marketize every element of everyday life occurs in places outside the paid workforce. Further, it attempts to create solidarity by redefining how individuals relate to their own social and economic reproduction. Both of these characteristics complicate the way scholars typically assess radical social movements, especially vis-à-vis Marxist orthodoxy that emphasizes the work of production over the work of social reproduction in theories of social change. In this ethnographic case study of Bed Stuy Food Not Bombs, the Really Really Free Market, and the Rock Dove Collective, I examine activists who provide free food, free goods, and free or low cost healthcare, respectively. In the process I attempt to reinvigorate the understanding of a politics of social reproduction.
Jesse W. Schwartz
CUNY Graduate Center
Center for Place Culture and Politics Application
Project Abstract

Genetic Revolutionaries: American Socialism, the Russian Revolution, and the Production of the Radical Immigrant, 1873-1929

Arguing that the emergence of the US as an industrial and imperial power was not only concomitant with American anti-radicalism but that the two are mutually constitutive, my project in its broadest terms is an intervention in Cold War historiography, studies in socialist literature, and contemporary analyses of empire. I contend that Gilded-Age concerns over immigration and class stratification cohere culturally around the figure of the "radical immigrant." Linking revolutionary ideas to ethnicity, this figure provides a justification for expansions of state power both domestically and abroad. Aided by postbellum racial categories, new forms of political representation, unprecedented waves of immigration, and the helixing of federal legislation with anthropometric sciences, the "radical immigrant" would abet a rapidly centralizing American government as it transitioned from a discourse of empire in the late nineteenth century to one of anticomunism in the early twentieth, producing contours of contact that still obtain.
Jonathan W. Gray

Fighting with Re-Memory: Transformational Politics in the Graphic Narratives

*Footnotes in Gaza* and *Waltz with Bashir*

Abstract

Joe Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza* and Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s *Waltz with Bashir* seek to break through the Israeli-Palestinian impasse by offering revisions of two controversial and transgressive events in Israeli-Palestinian history in the hopes of interjecting a new perspective into the (inter)national narrative. They emplot their new perspectives in part by marshalling the rhetorical power of graphic narrative to (re)present history, trusting that confronting their audience with their representations of historical trauma will enable a new vision of the past, and thus open new possibilities for the future. *Footnotes in Gaza* and *Waltz with Bashir* engage what Toni Morrison calls re-memory to construct their texts, assembling a historical narrative from the disputative memories of populations (both Israeli and Palestinian) who seem incapable of interrogating or integrating this history on their own.
2011-2012 Fellowship Applicant: Samantha Majic, PhD

ABSTRACT
This project engages the 2011-2012 Center for Place, Culture and Politics (CPCP) theme by examining how political activists and movements balance revolutionary and reformist tendencies. Specifically, it examines the American prostitutes’ rights movement and the emergence from it of the St. James Infirmary (SJI), a sex worker clinic in San Francisco; and the California Prevention and Education Project (CAL-PEP), which conducts HIV/AIDS prevention outreach to sex workers and other street-based populations in Oakland, CA. Based on multi-method qualitative research, I argue CAL-PEP and the SJI illustrate a process of radical institutionalization, defined as the incorporation of activist goals into nonprofit organizational practices. For them, this involves implementing and supporting commitments to prostitutes’ rights through their operations and activities, even as they are registered as nonprofits and receive government funding for service provision. As a result, they challenge dominant assumptions that activists who create formal (nonprofit) organizations necessarily abandon their commitments to broader socio-political change. A CPCP Fellowship will support me as I complete this project for publication with the University of Pennsylvania Press.
Fellowship Application: Center for Place, Culture and Politics

*The Fugue of Globalization*

In this project I will elaborate a notion of imitative counterpoint (fugue) that allows us to capture a wide spectrum of responses to globalizing pressures that occur within a context of unequal political and economic relations. The concept, I argue, is capacious enough to apply to instances of resistance (i.e., using the colonizer’s language and categories to undermine colonialism), ambivalence or pastiche (i.e., Bollywood movies), as well as acquiescence (i.e., out-and-out mimicry). The idea also provides purchase on the dialectic of freedom and constraint, or agency and social structure. Mimicry, I argue, is not a crude caricature of other ways of being, nor is it the unproblematic transplantation of foreign norms; it signifies their appropriation and transformation as they are anchored in different terrain. This project will build on my previous work by exploring how mided forms are transposed into different keys.
Abstract

My project will flesh out a political strategy of economic democratization capable of using reforms within capitalism to increase people’s democratic skills and say over the operation of the economic system in which they live. I am interested in domestic reforms, such as full employment policies, and anti-sexist and anti-racist policies, with the implications that these have for social, urban and educational policies as well as in reforms that challenge the way neoliberal globalization negates democracy in the global North and the global South alike. I am also interested in alternative economic institutions and practices, such as democratically-run worker cooperatives and participatory budgeting practices that build people’s appetite not only for reforms within the present system but for the kind of radical alternative to capitalism that would have to be attained if all people were to really have an equal say over the decisions that affect their lives and the future of the human species, its culture(s) and the planet on which its survival depends.
Charity Scribner

Transformational Politics and Culture after the German Autumn: Toward a Postmilitant Critique

Abstract

The Red Army Faction (RAF), a left-wing militant organization, terrorized West German society from the 1970s to the 90s. Led mainly by women, the group imagined its anti-imperialist, anti-fascist campaign as an extension of the revolutionary impulses that charged through the "Third World." What can we learn from the RAF's use (and abuse) of strategies that were often ill-suited to their historical circumstances? How have artists, writers and critics revisited the German armed struggle in order to elaborate "postmilitant" critiques of the polemics between reform and revolution? In response to these questions I propose to write two chapters that will complete the manuscript for my second book. Chapter 3 will examine early criticism of the RAF from prominent leftists such as Jürgen Habermas and Joschka Fischer. Chapter 7 will engage filmmaker Fatih Akin's reflections on the imprisonment of suspected terrorists in West Germany and Turkey in order to lay forth the postmilitant lessons that can be taken from the failures of the RAF program.
2011 Proposal for Center for Place, Culture and Politics, CUNY

No Justice, No Peace: Black liberation politics and the movement against the Vietnam war, 1955 – 1973

By Robyn C. Spencer
Assistant Professor of History, Lehman College

Abstract

Due to the often strained relationship between Black Power activists and the peace movement many historians have analyzed the two movements as separate entities. Many African Americans criticized the anti war movement for ignoring the connection between the domestic and international situation. However these tensions did not impede a movement against the Vietnam war from flowering amongst African Americans. This proposal is rooted in the premise that anti-war activism was central to the black freedom movement in the 1960s and 1970s and was a crucial aspect of black anti-imperialist and internationalist consciousness. This proposal argues that the framework of “peace” which has dominated how historians have understood the anti-war movement has served to obscure the grassroots movement against the war that was rooted in the African American community. It uncovers the many African American individuals and organizations who mobilized against the war during the era of Black Power.
“A Life History of Being Rebellious”: The Radicalism of Rosa Parks
Jeanne Theoharis

ABSTRACT

This biography of Rosa Parks and accompanying analysis of the mythologies surrounding the civil rights movement seeks to move past the fable of Rosa Parks to see her militancy. In doing so, it demonstrates the overlap between reformist strategy and revolutionary shift. Under contract with Beacon Press, this project aims to present a corrective of the popular iconography of Rosa Parks, the quiet seamstress who with a simple act birthed the modern civil rights movement, by providing an analysis of her six decades of political work. In the process, it forces us to confront a woman and a civil rights movement radical in nature that sought— for more than a half a century— to expose and eradicate the American racial caste system in jobs, schools, public services, and the law.