

American Social Criticism

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Visiting Scholar in History
Mondays and Thursdays, 6:30pm- 9pm
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Course description:

This course studies social criticism in postwar America, when the genre produced books from professors, novelists, activists like C. Wright Mills, Ayn Rand, Betty Friedan, Staughton Lynd, and Christopher Lasch. We will read recent biographies of these five critics, and consider the prospects and methods of historical biography accordingly. As our critics were concerned for the fate of the person in mass society, so we will locate the sources of their criticism in their own lives, personalities, and social experiences.

Assignments & Grading:

At each meeting you must submit a short paper, in the form of an intellectual journal, responding to the reading. You may write as little or as much on any one session, so long as your journal totals no fewer than 15 pages by the end of the course. Your journal is worth 40 percent of your final grade.

Your journal may address the biography's organization and coverage. Does it adopt a conventional chronological pattern, and proceed from childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age? Where does the stress fall, and why? You may address the literary style of the biography. What is the balance between narrative and analysis? How are these two strategies of presentation related? You may address the account of influence. Who influenced the subject of the biography? Who has been influenced by the subject? How does the biographer determine influence? And you may address the number and nature of the sources used in biography. How do they differ from conventional academic histories?

Your major research assignment, also worth 40 percent of your final grade, is a biographical essay of a social critic, to be selected in consultation with me. A prospectus, including an annotated bibliography, is due on May 27. Your final essay is due on June 21, when you will present your findings.

The remaining 20 percent of your grade lies in your participation in class discussion.

Reading:

A collection of reviews and essays is on reserve at the library. You are responsible for purchasing or borrowing the following five books:

Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (University of California Press, 2009).

Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Eerdmans, 2010).

Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

Carl Mirra, *The Admirable Radical: Staughton Lynd and Cold War Dissent, 1945-1970* (Kent State University Press, 2010).

Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

Schedule:

- May 17 Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (1988), chapter one; David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography" and Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review*, June 2009.
- May 20 Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition*
- May 24 John Summers, "The Epigone's Embrace: Irving Louis Horowitz on C. Wright Mills," *Minnesota Review*, Spring 2007; John Summers, "The Epigone's Embrace, Part II: C. Wright Mills and the New Left," *Left History*, Fall/Winter 2008; and John Summers, "Permanent Stranger," *Reviews in American History*, June 2010.
- May 27 Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market* ; movie: "The Fountainhead." Prospectus for research paper due today
- May 31** *no class*
- June 3 Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*; Alan Wolfe, "The Mystique of Betty Friedan," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1999; Naomi Wolf, "What Price Happiness?" *More Magazine*, April 2010; Stephanie Coontz, "Stop Blaming Betty Friedan," *Slate*, May 5, 2010.
- June 7 Carl Mirra, *The Admirable Radical*
- June 10 Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980," *Journal of American History*, September 1989; Eugene Genovese, "Staughton Lynd as Historian and Ideologue" (1968).
- June 14 Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*

- June 17 “History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch,” interviews by Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, *Journal of American History*, March 1994; Andrew Bacevich, “Family Man: Christopher Lasch and the Populist Imperative,” *World Affairs*, May/June 2010; Robert Cummings, “The Writings of Christopher Lasch: A Bibliography in Progress” (2003).
- June 21 Presentations