

American Culture Studies: Themes and Methodology

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Introduction. The paper presents the topics and rationale behind the American Cultural Studies course taught at the Applied Linguistics Department, New Bulgarian University. It focuses on how US history, geography, politics have shaped American society. The second part of the paper presents a classroom activity exemplifying an approach following Brogger (1992): from historical and social analysis, through the cultural analysis of dominant belief systems, to the textual analysis of the ways these belief systems are encoded in the language of written sources.

Part One

1. Description of the Course

The course is compulsory for Second Year Applied Linguistics students, major - English

Contact Hours: 2 hours per week, one semester

Course Aims: This interdisciplinary course presents American culture and society through the various ways in which physical geography, history, politics have shaped the evolution of dominant beliefs and values.

Course Objectives: On completion of the course students are expected to acquire basic historical, socio-political and cultural knowledge, gain insights into the diversity of the American experience, develop critical thinking skills which would facilitate further research.

2. Course Content:

I. The United States - Land and People. The American Identity.

The main geographical regions. 'A nation of immigrants', 'a salad bowl', 'a melting pot', 'a pizza'. Native Americans, Europeans, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Asians. A people on the move.

II. Historical Background. The First Settlers. Forming the New Nation.

Exploring the Americas. First Northern Settlements. Permanent Settlements. The Declaration of Independence. War with Britain. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights - the forging of a nation.

Seminar: Study the Declaration of Independence and discuss the meaning of ‘unalienable rights’.

III. The Abolitionist Movement. The Civil War.

Social reform efforts in the 1830s and 1840s. Economic changes. The anti-slavery movement. The war with Mexico 1846-1848. The formation of the Republican party. Secession from the Union. US’s bloodiest war. Aftermath of the war.

Seminar: How does slavery fit in with such basic American values as freedom and equality of opportunity?

IV. Years of Growth.

Territorial Expansion. The Gold Rush. The first railroad. The disappearance of the frontier. The Amerindians. The Industrial Revolution.

Seminar: The Frontier Heritage: self-reliance and the rugged individualist, the ‘Macho’, inventiveness and the can-do-spirit.

V. The US in WWI and WWII. The Period Between the two Wars.

The US’s involvement in WWI. Prohibition. The Roaring 20s. The Great Depression. FDR’s New Deal. World War II.

Seminar: How did the Depression and the New Deal influence American life and culture?

VI. The US today. The Legislative, Executive and Judicial Powers

The three main principles of government: federalism, the separation of powers, and respect for the Constitution and the rule of law. The system of ‘checks and balances’. Elections. The Court System.

Screening of the film *Twelve Angry Men*.

Seminar: The changing face of the presidential institution. What points does John Kenneth Galbraith raise in his 1988 article “The American Presidency: Going the Way of the Blacksmith”?

VII. Social Structure. Welfare and Education

The beliefs of early settlers as the basis for present-day social structure and social institutions. The US ideal of mass primary and secondary education and the extremely competitive and highly selective higher education system.

Seminar: Busing of schoolchildren - equality of opportunity?

VIII. Diversity of Religion

Religion has survived the rise of technology and of material prosperity more strongly in America than in Europe. Religion in the US has never been identified with an oppressive or dominant social class or set of political institutions.

Seminar: The Protestant Heritage: self-improvement, material success, hard work, self-discipline.

IX. Cultural Traditions and Modern Trends in the Arts:

From colonial times until the Civil War

From the Civil War era until World War I

Post-World War I - present

X. The Mass Media - the role of TV, newspapers and magazines in shaping societal thought patterns.

Seminar: Does contemporary mass media destroy traditional intellectual and aesthetic standards?

XI. Dominant Beliefs and Values in Contemporary USA

Welfare of the individual vs. the welfare of the group, individual freedom and self-reliance, equality of opportunity and competition, material wealth and hard work, family, gun control and the death penalty, women's place in society - 'the glass ceiling', AIDS, political correctness.

Part Two: An Exemplification

Topic: The topic we have chosen to exemplify the procedure is 'Enterprise'. The warm-up is the following quotation: *The business of America is business.* (President Calvin Coolidge)

Step 1. Following Brogger's model, we start with a *socio-historical introduction* which provides the basis for cultural interpretation. (For details on Brogger's three-stage teaching methodology see Yankova 2001). The historical perspective is indispensable in understanding the present. Students are expected to have read:

- The 1776 Declaration of Independence (perhaps the best known of American political documents, presenting the American theory of government and laying out basic human rights),
- The 1791 Bill of Rights (more specifically the 4th, 5th, 10th Amendments), which appeared as a result of a concern by some of the Founding Fathers that the Constitution would place authority in the hands of a few powerful people and would inevitably produce despotism. They appealed for a bill of rights because no government could be trusted to protect the liberties of its citizens; only by enumerating the rights of the people could there be any certainty that those rights would be protected.
- The 1863 Gettysburg Address - an eloquent, condensed formulation of democratic principles.

Step 2. We proceed with the *cultural analysis*: how a certain aspect of American life - its economic system - involves patterns of dominant beliefs and values which serve to define it. In this particular case we might consider such basic constituents of the American view of life as: the concepts of freedom, equality, the pursuit of happiness. These notions can be further broken down into ideological dichotomies such as civil equality versus socio-economic equality, individualism versus conformity, hard work versus leisure, etc.

Step 3. This is the *analysis of a text* to see how these cultural assumptions are embedded in the use of language itself, how language actually serves to construct the meaning of these values. The text we have chosen is an advertisement in 'Fortune' magazine. Let us look at it more closely.

The title itself is the epitome of the concepts underlying the Declaration of Independence. It evokes Thomas Jefferson's powerful words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". This equality, however, does not mean economic equality. It means equality of opportunity, everyone should have the same chance to achieve wealth by her own efforts, everyone is an independent person free to attain a place in the world with the fewest possible restrictions imposed by society (cf. the social security system in the US). This notion of personal freedom and responsibility for life is at the core of the American way of thinking. Hence, "After that, baby, you're on your own".

America is the land of business and opportunity. But it is up to the individual to succeed. This idea is further stressed by the choice of words and especially by their reiteration: 'you/your' - used 17 times in this short text; 'your own' (5 times); 'success', 'succeed', 'make it' (6 times); 'business' (4 times); 'ambition', 'drive' (4 times), 'opportunities', 'competition', 'target'. And, of course, we should not forget the significance of the title of the magazine itself - 'Fortune'.

Since this text is not simply some statement about culture, it is a primary cultural text it should be resituated into the larger socio-cultural discourse. Therefore, the discussion proceeds with considering the larger cultural framework of which this text is a part.

The American dream has always been to rise from poverty or modest wealth to great wealth. In the US this is usually accomplished through successful business careers. All of the great private fortunes in the nation were built by businessmen, many of whom started life with very little. Besides, not only is business seen as the best way for the individual to get rich, it is also looked upon as the best way for making the entire nation rich. Therefore, the businessman, the entrepreneur has always epitomized some of the American ideals: self-reliance, hard work, non-submission to higher authority, competition as the major source of progress and prosperity, etc.

During the twentieth century, however, the heroic image of the American businessman declined, especially tarnished by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Businessmen were blamed and held responsible for the hard times. Although contemporary Americans are often distrustful of the motives of businessmen as individuals they continue to believe in the free enterprise system, in the competitive nature of business as the most efficient way to produce material goods. The advertisement reflects this reinstatement of the image of the self-made man striving to make a profit: "Yes, ambition. You don't have to hide it any more. Society's decided that now it's OK to be up-front about the drive for success"

This might lead to a discussion of the changing face of business through the years:

- "Capitalism came in the first ships" (Degler 1984:2),
- the Puritan idea of 'moral economy',

- the 1830s commercialization, Andrew Carnegie's Darwinism (1900),
- 'cut-throat capitalism',
- the 1920s climax of adoration of business values,
- the Great Depression,
- consumerism.

To wrap up, we proceed with a comparative perspective. Teaching a foreign culture inevitably calls for and leads to comparisons between source and target language cultural beliefs. What is the image of the enterprising person in Bulgaria? How do Bulgarians view the get-rich-quick philosophy? What is the best way to get rich in Bulgaria? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a more centralized economy? These questions would hardly elicit the same answers as those within the American context. Can you find Bulgarian equivalents to the following sayings:

Every man for himself.

It's a dog-eat-dog world.

May the best man win.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Concluding Remarks. Deriving cultural concepts encoded in primary texts has proved to be an interesting and challenging activity in the culture studies classroom. The discussion of cultural similarities and differences between target and source culture would not only provide students with a better grasp of foreign culture; it would also make them aware of their attitude to their own culture.

Suggestions for Further Reading on the topic of 'Enterprise':

Arthur Miller. *Death of a Salesman*.

Theodore Dreiser. *An American Tragedy*.

Andrew Carnegie. *The Gospel of Wealth*.

Henry Ford. *My Life and Work*.

Works Cited

Brogger, Fredrik Chr. *Culture, Language, Text*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1992.

Degler, Carl N., *Out of Our Past*, 3rd edition, New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1984.

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