

**Values in American Culture:  
An Introduction to American Ideas, Ideals, and Ideologies**

40. 248, 42. 248 & 59. 248  
University of Massachusetts Lowell  
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The world hears more about “American ideals” and “American values” than ever before. The global economic collapse of 2008 has made certain people question the value of many American economic and social values. The U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been justified in part as an effort to extend American values to the Iraqi people and the Middle East. Looking just a little further back in history, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the “victory” of the West in the Cold War has often been understood as the triumph of American ideals. Yet, many inside and outside the U.S. have asked if the current wars and economic collapse hasn't betrayed core American values, especially in light of abuses such as those at the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons. And surely 9/11 and the series of attacks that have followed suggest that at least some people emphatically dissent from the values of America.

But what are these American values so often called upon and even fought over? Are they unique to America? Where do they come from? What produced them? Are they products of particular men and women, or the result of long durée histories of economic and social transformation? Do they grow from the land itself (its vast size, for example), or perhaps they are transcendental and universal, beyond history and place?

Other questions follow these: Can certain values co-exist – like capitalism and democracy, individuality and community – or are they always going to be at odds with each other? Are values guiding ideals or duping ideologies? How does one make sense of the U.S.'s repeated betrayal of its self-proclaimed highest values? What is the relation between empire and values? How does one arbitrate differing cultural values in a many cultured nation and world?

These questions and many others will demand a complex, historical, and multidisciplinary examination of American values. Indeed, it's important to understand the interdisciplinary approach of this course. This is not a straightforward, conventional history course where we march through a national history of values. (No such history has been satisfactorily written – I doubt it could be.) Instead, our objects of study are wide ranging in terms of media – print texts, films, photographs, music, lyrics, speeches – and genre – works of fiction and non-fiction, plays and polemics, novels and vaudeville, works of theoretical analysis and works of emotional persuasion, “high art” and “popular” entertainments (a distinction I make with great caution). It is important that you begin to distinguish between all these different kinds of texts because each will require a somewhat different mode of interpretation and will lead to different kinds of class discussion. The study questions I include with the readings will assist you in this respect.

In addition to these pairs, the syllabus is also arranged around three intertwined threads: (1) questions of identity (race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality) and community, (2) questions surrounding capitalism and the values it produces, and (3) questions about how we should think about U.S. values in a global context. The boldface headings in the syllabus will help you identify these different threads.

**Evaluations:** Your performance in this class is determined by your class participation, daily quizzes, two tests, and two papers/project. The final-grade weighting of these assignments is included in the “Rules” section of this syllabus.

The **final paper/project** will offer students a chance to demonstrate the knowledge and skills developed during the course while also providing them with considerable creative freedom. For example, you might design a virtual museum exhibit, make a documentary video about an aspect of Lowell connected to the course, construct an American Values syllabus of your own, plan and teach a class of a younger sibling in high school or elementary school, interview an artist, politician, or some other local figure, research in detail one of the writers on our syllabus – the possibilities are endless. The capstone project

will be due in the final week of class, but we will work on it throughout the second half of the course (the development of the project will involve several stages).

You will learn a great deal in this course, I am certain, but let me list some of the primary learning objectives of “Values in American Culture.” At the end of the course, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the arguments of the analytical and polemical texts on the syllabus and provide alternative arguments.
2. Interpret some of the important themes in the imaginative texts and understand how they develop or are developed by the analytical and polemical texts.
3. Understand and use a vocabulary of key terms and concepts (see key concepts sheet), linking those key terms to works on the syllabus.
4. Demonstrate the above knowledge in a written essay, creative project, class discussion, class presentation, and tests.

Required Texts (available in the bookstore and many other places):

Hollinger and Capper, eds. The American Intellectual Tradition, VOL. 2. Oxford UP.  
Richard Wright, Native Son, Harper Perennial.  
Graham Greene. The Quiet American. Penguin Classics.

Other readings will be distributed in class or available on the web. These readings are marked with a “\*.” *Please use the websites I have put on the syllabus* (some of them are shorten from the original, and you will be saving yourself a great amount of reading). *Please print the web material and bring your copy to class.*

*Important Dates:*

Jan. 27	Last day to add without a permission number
Feb. 3	Last day to add with a permission number, last day to drop without record
April 10	Last day for students to withdraw from course with a “W”

In accordance with University policy and the ADA, I will provide accommodation for students with documented disabilities. If you have a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services: McGauvran 363 (978-934-4338) as soon as possible. They will contact me regarding effective accommodations. In order to speed up this process, you can also let me know in person or via email. This documentation is confidential.

### **Course Rules and Requirements**

1. **Class participation** makes possible a dynamic, collaborative learning community -- the possibility that we as a community produce knowledge. For this reason, class participation is part of your final grade. In order to participate you must, of course, come to class well prepared. Don't just do the reading, but write down questions you have and begin to develop opinions about the reading. Always bring the assigned texts and materials with you to class: every class discussion will involve us in some close analysis of specific passages and images. I will often provide handouts with study questions, and you should come to class having considered those questions in depth. You should also come to each class with at least one marked passage or image and/or one well-considered question or observation to launch discussion. The less assertive need not fear: class participation is not measured by how much you talk; rather, it is the degree of your involvement with and attentiveness in the class, your ability to listen to and respond to your peers, your willingness to share your thoughts in a constructive way.
2. You will write two **formal papers/projects** in this course. I will distribute a handout detailing requirements, due dates, and procedures. All assignments is due **AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS** and must be typed. Late assignments lose half a letter grade for each class period late. **Only hard copies of written work will be accepted.**
3. **Plagiarism or cheating** of any sort will result in failure of the course. For a discussion of plagiarism see the plagiarism handout.

4. This course has two **tests**. Tests may only be taken late under extraordinary circumstances, and the student must provide a note from a doctor or a dean. In such situations, the request to take the test late must be made at least 24 hours in advance. Failure to follow these rules will result in a zero on the test.
5. **You are required to attend class.** Also, you must have prepared whatever material the assignment requires. An absence will affect your participation grade. And prolonged absences will lead to failure of the course. If you miss class more than three times I will expect you to see me in my office to discuss your future in the course and possible withdrawal. If you miss five classes you will fail the course.
6. If you come to class **excessively or repeatedly late**, it will affect your grade. Also, please refrain from getting up and leaving the room during class unless it's an emergency.
7. You may drink in class, **but you may not eat**. Please silence your phone (vibrate is not silence), and please refrain from messaging during class. If your phone is in way used in class, I will immediately confiscate it and call my close friend who runs a gambling ring in Turkmenistan.
8. Your **final grade** is comprised of your grades on the papers/final projects (40% of total), your grade on the two tests (20% each of total), and your grade on daily quizzes and class participation (together 20% of total).
9. In the event of a **class cancellation** because of snow or my absence, please stay current with the syllabus.
10. Please feel free to drop by my office hours to discuss the class or the reading/writing assignments. Of course, I will be happy to make appointments at other times if my office hours conflict with your schedule. **You can best reach me by email.**
11. You are responsible for checking your **UNIVERSITY email account**.

### Syllabus

#### *Week (1) of Jan. 23*

## **FIRST QUESTION: Is the American Century Over? The U.S. in a global context.**

M: Course Introduction: What is a course about American Values?

W: Henry R. Luce, from "The American Century," in Am. Intellectual Trad.

#### *Week (2) of Jan. 30*

M: Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power," Foreign Affairs, May/June, 2008 (available on wiki)

W: Samuel P. Huntington, "A Clash of Civilization?" (1993) in Am. Intellectual Trad.  
Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," The Nation, (2001) <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/>

#### *Week (3) of Feb. 6*

M: Graham Greene, The Quiet American (1955), 3-59

W: Greene, 63-99

#### *Week (4) of Feb. 13*

M: Greene, 99-155 DISCUSSION OF PAPER WRITING

W: Greene, 155-end

***Week (5) of Feb. 20***

M: NO CLASS: PRESIDENTS DAY

W: Three Kings (dir. David O. Russell, 1999)

***Week (6) of Feb. 27***

**SECOND QUESTION: Are Capitalism and Democracy Conflicting Ideas?  
Market Values**

M: **FIRST PAPER DUE**

W: Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (1849), Preamble and Ch. 1  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

***Week (7) of March 5***

M: Milton Freedman, Selections from Capitalism and Freedom (1962) in Am. Intel. Tradition

W: **Midterm**

***Week (8) of March 12 SPRING BREAK***

***Week (9) of March 19***

M: Herman Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener" (1856) (will be posted on the class website)

W: Melville, "Bartleby" (cont.)

***Week (10) of March 26***

M: Modern Times (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1936)

**THIRD QUESTION: How should we understand racial and gender  
difference (and difference of other sorts) in our community?**

W: Richard Wright, Native Son (1940), Pages 1-45

***Week (11) of April 2***

M: Wright, Pages 45-145

W: Wright, Pages 145-245

***Week (12) of April 9***

M: Wright, Pages 245-430 (End)

W: Gunnar Myrdal, Selection from An American Dilemma (1944) in Am. Intel Trad.  
Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to be Colored Me" (1928) (Handout)

***Week (13) of April 16***

M: NO CLASS: Patriots Day

W: Frederick Douglass, TBD  
W. E. B. Du Bois, Selections from The Souls of Black Folk (1903) in Am. Intel. Tradition

***Week (14) of April 23***

M: **FINAL PAPER/PROJECT DUE**

W: Martin Luther King, Jr., Selection from "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) in Am. Intel Trad.

***Week (15) of April 30***

M: Gloria Anzaldua, Selection from Borderlands/La Frontera (1987) in Am. Intel. Trad.

W: Candyman (dir. Rose, 1992)

**Week (16) of May 7**

M: **LAST DAY OF CLASS: Reflections**

**Final Test during exam period.**