

01:050:101

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Office Hours: Mondays, 12:15-4:00

Introduction to American Studies: Individualism vs. Communitarianism in American Life

“I celebrate myself and sing myself”
[Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”]

“America is at the competitive extreme. It uniquely frustrates the need and
desire to belong.”
[Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*]

This course endeavors to introduce students to the American Studies interdisciplinary method by which one approaches a subject through a variety of means—including literature, film, history, music, and politics. This semester the subject is the struggle between individualism and communitarianism in American life. Obviously, these are both attractive features. Nevertheless, some would argue that Americans are so extremely individualistic as to be incapable of cooperating with one another or with other nations. Others would deny this, arguing that we are immensely cooperative and community oriented, perhaps too much so. It shall be our task in this course to discover which is correct or whether, in the alternative, these opposites may actually be in a healthy balance, something every true democracy requires.

Books (available in the Douglass bookstore)

Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (abridged, Hefner edition only)
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
B.F. Skinner, *Walden II*
Owen Wister, *The Virginian*
Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

Electronic Reserve

In addition to the books listed above, there are a number of items on electronic reserve in the library. You will find them in the syllabus with an asterisk (*) You may either read them on-line or print them out. However, I strongly urge you to print them out and to bring them to class when they are to be discussed. As you perhaps know, you can print them at university computer labs without cost—even the paper is provided. To access these materials, get on the Web, access Rutgers, then libraries, then reserves, then enter my name (“Rockland”) and go to our course. I have another course with considerably more electronic reserves, so don’t get them confused. Be certain to do all readings for the course **before** their discussion date in class.

Guests

Since this is our department's introductory course, it shall be our pleasure to have, from time to time, guest speakers—not only to enrich our studies but to introduce you to my colleagues in American Studies

Films

While we will see several films in class, most of the films for this course are full length, feature films that have been placed on reserve in the media/ music room of the Douglass library. Pass the circulation desk on its left and descend the stairs two flights. Many if not all of these films are also available for rental in videostores, from Netflix, etc. should you prefer to see them on your own. Films placed on reserve will appear with the # sign after their listing in the syllabus. Each film will be on reserve for two weeks up to and including its discussion date in class and not available after that date. As with the readings, be sure to see the films on reserve **before** they are discussed in class.

The hours of the music/media room in the Douglass library are: Mondays thru Thursdays: 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fridays, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; Saturdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sundays, 12 noon-8 p.m.

SYLLABUS

- Thursday, Sept. 6 INTRODUCTION: Individualism and Communitarianism
as a way to tell the story of the United States
- one page handout: "From the Story of Daniel Boone."
Song: Randy Newman, "My Life is Good"
- Monday, Sept. 10 INTRODUCTION II
- read: excerpt from Vance Packard, *A Nation of Strangers* (*) and
preface and chapter I from Michael Rockland, *Homes on
Wheels* (*) Reminder: * means electronic reserve.
Song: Carol King "So Far Away"
- Thursday, Sept.13 and LIBERTY VS. EQUALITY
Monday, Sept. 17
- Read: Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, chapters 4,
5, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 36, 41, 42,
43, 45, 46, 50, 53, 55, 56.
- Thursday, Sept. 20, YOUTH CULTURE AND SUB-CULTURE
Guest speaker, Professor Nicole Fleetwood
- see: *Easy Rider* (#) Reminder: # means film is on reserve

Thursday, Nov. 1 LONELINESS AND AMERICAN MUSIC
(a continuation of Philip Slater)

Guest speaker: Professor Angus Gillespie

Monday, Nov. 5 CAPITALISM AND COMRADERY

see: *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (#) and *Midnight Cowboy* (#)

Thursday, Nov. 8 WHEN COMMUNITY IS DESTROYED BY NATURE

read: Kai Erikson, "Collective Trauma: Loss of Communitality"

Monday, Nov. 12 BUFFALO CREEK, KATRINA, AND COMMUNITY

continued discussion of Erikson
film: "The Shakers"

Thursday, Nov. 15 THE WEST: COWBOYS OR SCHOOLMARMS?

Guest lecturer: Professor Ann Fabian
read Owen Wister, *The Virginian*

Monday, Nov. 19 THE WEST (continued)

Tuesday, Nov. 20 A DIFFERENT LOOK AT COWBOYS: INDIVIDUALISM AND
THE LIMITS OF 'GAY' COMMUNITY

Guest speaker: Professor Ben Sifuentes
read: Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" (*)

Monday, Nov. 26 THE COWBOY AND RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM

See: *High Noon*

TERM PROJECTS DUE THIS DAY WITHOUT FAIL IN CLASS

Thursday, Nov. 29 THE ASIAN-AMERICAN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

see: *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (#)
film in class *Days of Waiting*

Monday, Dec. 3 NO ONE BOWLS ALONE!

read: excerpts from Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*

Thursday, Dec. 6 BOWLING ALONE (continued)
Film: *The Farm*

Monday, Dec. 10 THAT GOVERNMENT IS BEST THAT DOES NOT GOVERN
AT ALL: THE VISION OF AYN RAND

see: *The Fountainhead*

FINAL EXAMINATION: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 12-3

Course Requirements

Attendance will be taken every day before class. If you are late, be sure to check in with me after class. But try not to be late. Attendance may negatively affect your grade in the course. Moreover, poor attendance will almost guarantee your doing poorly on the objective midterm and on the objective portion of the final.

Crib Sheet Policy You will be allowed to bring with you to class for the midterm quiz a crib-sheet—one piece of paper (you can use both sides) on which you may write whatever you'd like. At the final you will also be allowed a crib sheet for the objective portion and you may bring your books and other readings as well to the final for the essay portion.

Final Exam The final exam will consist of an objective quiz similar to that at the midterm and based largely on the work of the second half of the semester. It will be followed by an essay or two based on the entire course.

On Schedule: Stay on schedule with your reading and with the films. Otherwise, you will not know what we are talking about in class. Also, I expect all of your work to be done within the confines of the course. Please do not approach me to discuss doing “something extra” to make up for some deficiency in your work. Do it right the first time.

Term Project: Your term project is due without fail in class (projects sent as e-mail attachments are not acceptable) on Monday, November 26 and will be returned at the final on December 18. The grades of late papers will be lowered.

I would like you to write an autobiographical essay of between 8-10 pages on how the theme of our course, individualism vs. communitarianism, has impacted and continues to impact your life. Our course argues that this is a, if not *the*, central issue in American domestic history. If this is correct, then it is a central issue in our individual lives as well. If America struggles between the poles of individualism and communitarianism (or as Tocqueville states it, between liberty and equality) then so do we all as individuals.

Please don't just list a great number of incidents in your life. Rather, consider the most significant ones in depth and in detail.

Further, and this is most important, I would like you to relate these events or incidents to the readings, films, and lectures of our course that have resonance in your life. There is no need to mention all the readings and films and lectures—only those that particularly impressed you and where you see considerable overlap with your own life or which helped you to define just who you are at this stage of your life. Note that since term projects are due November 26 you need only consider materials up through that date or shortly before that date.

Concentrate on turning this essay into literature. The quality of the writing is quite as important as the quality of your thought—indeed, they are perhaps inseparable one from the other. Make certain to have completed a draft of the project early in the semester and to go on improving it in many subsequent drafts. There is no reason why you cannot begin work on this essay almost immediately. It is, after all, at least in part about you, and this *is* a term project, not something to be done at the last minute. Plan on going through several drafts. All fine writers do.