Before 1968: Social Critique in a Silent Decade

Course description:
Social critique is often supposed to have reached its zenith in the United States, and globally, with the youth movements of 1968—at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, responses to the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and the intensification of the Vietnam War and protests against it.

But significant—and trenchant—critiques of postwar American society had already been developing and pursued into new forms of activism in the 1950s and early 1960s. This seminar seeks to recover and understand these intellectual, cultural, and political efforts, which Americans made only a few years out from or in the midst of the Taft-Hartley Act, “Treaty of Detroit,” House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and McCarthyism.

We will read the literary works and works of social criticism in strictly chronological order of publication for a few reasons. We will reconstruct what resources and arguments would have been available to readers, tracing timelines, intellectual lineages, and cultural trends. This approach will enable us to identify borders, walls, and silences between discursive and activist communities as well as moments of crossover, engagement, contestation, and rupture. This will culminate in mapping and debating the conceptual matrix that underpinned the broad revolutions of 1968.

Assignments:
Participation in discussion (20%)
Response papers (20%)—Write ~200 words on each week’s readings, plus one or two questions inspired by them.
Research presentation (20%)—Share your ongoing research for 8-10 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of feedback and Q&A.
Research paper (40%)—Topic of your choosing in consultation with instructor. 12-15 pages, 12-pt font, double-spaced.

Schedule
Week 1
Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery” (1948)

Secondary:

Week 2
C. Wright Mills, White Collar: The American Middle Classes (1951)
Charles Denby, Indignant Heart (1952)

Secondary:
Lizbeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), selections

**Week 3**
James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)
Arthur Miller, “The Crucible” (1953)

*Secondary:*

**Week 4**
James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

*Secondary:*

**Week 5**
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)
Martin. Stride Toward Freedom (1957)
Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Power of Nonviolence” (1958)

*Secondary:*
Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry, eds. *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Belknap Press, 2018)

**Week 6**
Martin Luther King, Jr., “If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins.” Speech to the AFL-CIO (1961)

*Secondary:*

**Week 7**
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)
Students for a Democratic Society, “Port Huron Statement” (1962)

Secondary:

**Week 8**
Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)
Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (1963)

Secondary:
Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry, eds. *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Belknap Press, 2018)

Research Paper Proposal Due (One paragraph on the topic, plus annotated bibliography of 5 or more sources)

**Week 9**

Secondary:

**Week 10**
The Student Voice: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1960-1965)
James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (1965)

Secondary:

**Week 11**
SNCC, Freedom School Poetry (1966)
SNCC Newsletter (1967)
Fannie Lou Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges* (1967)
Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here* (1967)

**Secondary:**
Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry, eds. *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Belknap Press, 2018)

**Week 12**
Student presentations

**Week 13**
Student presentations

**Research Papers Due**