By way of introduction

The Course aims at fostering an awareness about the extent to which culture underpins and inspires all aspects of social life in contemporary societies. The social creation of culture as well as the cultural creation of society, represent converging processes that will be discussed finding guidance in the fields of cultural anthropology, sociological theory and social history.

The Course concentrates on specific processes of cultural creation, diffusion and use that mould personal as well as collective identities and account for the emergence of specific social habits and arrangements within a “globalizing” world. More specifically the Course aims at investigating the cultural complexities of taste and taste-making. We will take advantage of the polysemic nature of the term “taste” and we will discuss:

first - its sensory-related dimensions (attention will be devoted to the culture of food and foodways in specific contexts) and,

secondly, the culturally-infused ability at drawing distinctions - aesthetic and sociological - in matters related to types of etiquette prevailing within given cultures and according to different social stratification patterns.

The classical works by Thorstein Veblen, by some members of the Frankfurt School, as well as by Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas and Norbert Elias will provide background references.

One of the tasks that the Course should fulfill is to help students in finding the ordinary in the apparently exotic setting while disembedding its underlying patterns; assessing the extent to which being a “foreigner” may (or may not) help as an interpretive tool for cultural experience.

By the end of the semester, students are expected to develop an individual research project that should prove their skills at decoding some of the cultural phenomena to which they have been exposed during their stay abroad.

Topics for discussion

The rise of capitalist economies and the making of modernity have largely contributed - among many other factors - to a “re-definition” of the concept of culture, first in Anthropology and later in Sociology. The social sciences have dealt with the concept of culture almost since their own inception - i.e. since
the 18th century – and in ways that have generated a long-standing debate over its different meanings.

For the purpose of the Course we will root the discussion within the frame of an approach that considers food and etiquette as selected “cultural objects” that are “constructed” and classified according to specific taxonomies by different social groups. It is not so much the ‘material’ quality of food that is at stake (although even that is relevant!), but rather its social meaning and symbolic usage and such that help us in understanding personal choices and cultural dynamics. The problematic linkage existing between the “natural” world and the “cultural” world is nowhere more apparent than in the case of our daily edible intakes and of the social rituals, performances and more or less rigid normative patterns that surround them. Taste, in itself, touches upon both the sensory and the cognitive – even ethic – dimensions of human awareness.

The same way that developing a taste for some specific food is an “acquired” cultural trait – almost as if learning a foreign language – so is the process of etiquette management and taste-making in given environments and at different moments in Western history. The acquisition of “good manners” has accompanied the making of modern and contemporary societies up to the present (global) obsession with “netiquette” issues. The Course will discuss examples of the normative (hence cultural) dimensions that surround the “appropriateness” of given forms of behavior (including the adoption of those vestimentary rules that are powerful indicators of social changes in gender relations).

By concentrating the attention on patterns of classifications and norms, the Course aims at providing empirical evidence for the discussion of some of the basic ingredients of culture while – at the same time – signalling its constant dynamics.

Requirements

The Course is developed through lectures, PPT presentations and in-class discussions; a one-day Field Trip and specially designed Site visits are integral parts of the Course. Therefore it is of basic importance that only students who plan to be actively involved in class-participation should attend. Engaging in activities such as keeping a personal diary, taking photos, recording data (specifically: observing people in public places, in informal settings etc.) throughout the duration of the Semester is encouraged – inasmuch as it may represent a helpful “data mining” support in view of the preparation of the Final Paper.

Each week students are expected to come to class having done their home-work (i.e. written reports, readings as assigned in the Syllabus, etc.). Home-work represents the required basis for class-discussion: it is not enough to have just “done it”. Each student should draw from it knowledgeable and debatable issues that may stir the attention both of fellow-students and of the instructor. “Food” for thought should be tasty!
**Discussion leaders** (max of four per week) will sign up with the instructor during the first three weeks of the Semester. The discussion leaders are expected to provide (each Monday night by email) the Instructor with a brief outline of the arguments they are suggesting for class discussion.

Assigned and recommended readings are listed below. Assessments of class performance will be of various kinds:
* outline of class discussion proposals as drawn from weekly readings (each discussion leader will present their own);
* Site-Visit report (approx 2 pages); Field-Trip report (4 pages);
* Mid-term paper (assigned topic; take-home; 8 to 10 pages)
* outline of Final Paper due in early November;
* Final Paper (take-home, individual research project whose contents and methodology are to be discussed with the instructor by the second week in November according to each student’s outline; 12 pages).

**Grading**
Class attendance, film and site visits report, plus overall active class participation: 30% of final grade (includes also in-class discussion leader’s outline, etc.)
Field Trip report: 15%
Mid-Term: 25%
Final Paper: 30%

Please read carefully the following!
Students are expected to attend all classes; absences will affect the Course grade. Field Trip and Site Visits’ attendance is mandatory.
No late handing-in of assignments unless agreed upon with the instructor. Late handing-in of Mid-Term and Final paper will automatically decrease by half a point per day the (otherwise) deserved grade. Thank you!

Full bibliographical reference (inclusive of the URL of each online item, E-book version etc.) is mentioned in the Syllabus for your own convenience. Recommended books are placed on reserve at Villa Ulivi Library: the list may provide you with inspirational topics for your Final paper.

Recommended books in the Villa Ulivi Library (a number of them are also available ONLINE).

C. Helstosky, Oil and garlic: food and politics in Italy, Berg, 2004.
Schedule and Outline

All reading assignments from Journals are accessible through the Course’s BLACKBOARD; whilst e-texts are accessible via NYU online resources (Bobst Library, “e-brary”, etc.).

Recommended books are placed on reserve at the Villa Ulivi Library.

1. Tuesday Sept. 7th
   
   COURSE PRESENTATION. KEY CONCEPTS.
   
   During the week students are expected to view on their own BABETTE’S FEAST (G. Axel dir., based on a novel by I. Dinesen).
   
   (DVD available at Villa Ulivi’s Front Desk through the kindness of Silvia or Simone) and write a 2 pages’ report that will be discussed in class the following week (hand-in prior to sept.14th class).

2. Tuesday Sept. 14th
   
   CULTURE AS COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOR

   Readings: W. Griswold, “Cultural meaning” and “Culture as social creation” both in W. Griswold, Cultures and societies in a changing World, Pine Forge Press, 2008; (Course Blackboard resource).

3. Tuesday Sept. 21st
   
   Site visit

   Museo degli Argenti and Museo del Costume

   Venue: Palazzo Pitti. During class hours.

   The Museo degli Argenti Collection includes specimen of the silverware, tableware and other ‘memorabilia’ collected by the Medici family and their descendants over 4 centuries. The Museo del Costume displays historical fashion collections that rotate over time.

4. Tuesday Sept. 28th
   
   MATTERS OF TASTE

   
   Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/684894

   C. Korsmeyer, “The meaning of taste”, Ch. 4 from Making sense of taste, Cornell UP, 1999 (Course Blackboard Resource)

   << Site visit report to be handed in >>

5. Tuesday Oct. 5th
   
   CLASSIFYING AND MAKING SENSE

   Readings: A. Hennion, “Those things that hold us together: taste and sociology”, CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY, 1, 1, 97-113;
6. Saturday Oct. 9th

Field Trip CERTALDO: “Rassegna di prodotti e piaceri del gusto” (Food Fair)
A mix of gastronomic display and food-tasting experience in the medieval historic center of Certaldo. Hometown of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), the famed author of the Decameron novels (and creator of Chichibio, the shrewd cook!). On our way we will visit the Museo della Ceramica in Montelupo and the recently inaugurated Museo del Vetro in Empoli. Both ceramics and glassware represent important items in our appreciation of the culture of food (full day excursion by reserved bus).

7. Tuesday Oct. 12th


>>Field trip report due <<

8. Tues. Oct. 19th

Readings: J. Gronow, “Philosophical aesthetics and the refinement of taste” and “Fashion and taste”, both in The Sociology of taste, Routledge, 1997 (Online resource).

>>>>>> Mid term due <<<<<<<<
(take-home essay on assigned topic)

9. Tues. Nov. 2nd

Discussion of excerpts from classical authors available online: e.g. Baldassarre Castiglione, Lord Chesterfield, Emily Post, and others including literary renditions such as the
ones created by Henry James, Edith Wharton and Marcel Proust.

10. Tues. Nov. 9th

**ETIQUETTE AS A MIRROR FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY**


<< Outline of Final Paper due >>

11. Tues. Nov. 16th

**SITE VISIT:** Villa La Pietra guided visit and selected readings from H. Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete*.

12. Tues. Nov. 23rd

**TASTE AND FASHION**


13. Tues. Nov. 30th

**PREDICAMENTS OF CULTURE**

14. Tues. Dec. 7th  In-Class Presentation of Students’ Research Projects.

<< Final paper due Dec. 14th >>