Overview and Objectives

Why are some countries more corrupt than others? What explains the prevalence of poor development outcomes in some communities? Why do Europeans support redistribution more than Americans? Culture is often presented as an answer to some of these questions, yet it is not always clear how culture matters or what culture even is.

The goals of the course are twofold. The first is to impose some structure on the fuzzy term “culture”, and to rigorously define and understand it using the tools of social science. We will introduce (and usually formally define) terms such as social norms, preferences and beliefs, and explore how we can measure them empirically. We will discuss, among other things, where culture comes from, how it is transmitted, why it persists and how it changes. The second goal of the course is to provide an overview of the possible implications of culture in domains such as economic growth, the provision of public goods, voting behavior, democracy or nationalism.

The study of culture is interdisciplinary and combines insights from fields as disparate as game theory, the study of social networks, evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology and economics. Ultimately, this course will offer a broad overview of theoretical and empirical approaches to studying culture, so that students can familiarize themselves with extant literature and identify avenues for future research.

This is a course primarily intended for PhD students in Political Science and other social sciences. While there are no official pre-requisites, many of the readings require some knowledge of game theory and econometrics/statistics. Familiarity with formal modeling will also be helpful. Enrollment for non-PhD students requires the approval of the instructor.

Class Requirements

The final course grade will be assigned as follows:

- In-class participation (20%). Students will be expected to read broadly each week, and to participate in seminar discussions of the readings. Starred readings are required.
- Referee report (15%). Students will be assigned a paper related to the topics discussed in class to read and review. These papers will be recent, still unpublished working papers and your referee report should be written as if you were to submit it to a journal considering the paper for publication. The list of papers to be reviewed will be posted during the third week of class, and your preferences will be taken into account for assignment. Reports are due on Canvas by 6PM on Wednesday of the fifth week of class.
• In-class presentation of a paper (15%). During the final four weeks, which are devoted to discussing the economic and political implications of culture, each student will be assigned one of the required readings to present in class. You should prepare slides for your presentation, summarize the broad point and methodology of the paper and highlight issues for discussion (what you would change, or further suggestions on the paper).

• Final research project (50%). This should be a proposal (7-10 pages) on a research question that is motivated by or related to the literature discussed in the course. It should include a review of the extant literature on the topic and explore an approach to answering the question.

Books for Purchase


All books will be put on course reserve in the library; books designated for purchase are ones that will be useful for permanent scholarly libraries. All articles will be available on the web or uploaded to the Canvas site.

Students with Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk; phone: 723-1066; web site http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae

Preliminary Course Outline

An * implies a required reading for discussion. Note that this is a preliminary schedule, and both the content and the order of readings will change prior to the first day of class.

Part I: Understanding culture

Week 1: Colloquial and academic understandings of culture


**Week 2: Where does culture come from?**


• Fogli, Alessandra and Veldkamp, Laura. 2014. “Germs, Social Networks and Growth,” mimeo, New York University.


**Week 3: Cultural persistence and change**


Week 4: Social norms and the enforcement of culture

• * Robert Ellickson, Order Without Law, Chapters 1-6, 11-13.


Week 5: Cultural transmission


Week 6: How can we measure culture?


Part II: Implications of culture

Week 7: Economic growth


Week 8: Cooperation, diversity, and public goods provision


Week 9: Good institutions

Community institutions


• * Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work, Chapters 1, 4-5.


Redistribution


Week 10: Ethnic and national identity