POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY: THE POLITICS OF DAILY LIFE

A. Motives and Goals:
Beyond the fact that over the years a number of graduate students have asked me to teach a course such as this one, another reason for offering this course stems from a long-standing fascination with the politics of the quotidian in all its varied forms. This interest spawns several important questions. First, are the small events, phenomena, attitudes, and emotions of daily life, however apolitical they might seem to be, actually deeply political on levels we might not always be aware of? In other words, where do we situate the political realm? Second, how can we relate these small events, phenomena, behaviors, and attitudes — politics writ small — to the larger political phenomena that interest us both as political scientists and as citizens. Can we link the micro-world of daily existence and experience to the macro-world of both politics and political science. Moreover, and this is primarily a methodological question, how may we best accomplish this linkage? Political ethnography is one possible answer to this question. In addition, and to be honest, I have long wondered if perhaps I have somewhere lurking within me an as yet unwritten book on the politics of daily life. This seminar represents an initial attempt to begin thinking about this project.

This course has two primary goals. The first is to examine the micro-political world of daily life and, in so doing, think systematically about different forms of small-scale political organization. The world of daily life has a plurality of political forms, not all of which are easily recognizable within the prevailing paradigms of political science. Thus, one assumption undergirding this course is that the state, however important it might be, has been something of a cognitive trap for political scientists. Although it is often a critical part of the context in which people lead their daily lives, it is — on a daily basis — usually no more than that. Most politics, political behavior, and political phenomena occur without reference to the state. Yet we as political scientists continue to ignore this fundamental reality of the quotidian. The second goal is to read and examine political ethnographies with an eye toward what this methodological form has to offer and how it might be adapted or even improved.

Full disclosure requires the following statement: This course is conceived with the intent of exploring a topic of interest to both the instructor and, I hope, to the students. Since the readings are eclectic, not canonical, this seminar is not designed to prepare students for their preliminary examinations in either methodology or comparative politics. If, however, it should have that effect, it will be an unintended consequence.
B. Requirements:
Since I do not dispense Truth, the course will be run as a seminar. Although I might occasionally have something to impart which will require a “mini-lecture,” these will be few and far between. This format obviously places a great burden on the seminar participants to attend regularly, read diligently, and participate actively in class discussions.

To facilitate this participation, each week one student will act as discussion leader. The discussion leader will have two tasks. First, s/he will present a critical, theoretical analysis of the week’s major reading(s). These presentations should be delivered from an outline, not read verbatim, and ought to take from 10 to 15 minutes. Be prepared to field questions from both the instructor and the other seminar participants after your talk. Under no circumstances, however, will any presentation be allotted more than 15 minutes. Second, the discussion leader should use his or her acquired expertise on the subject matter in question to enliven and stimulate our collective deliberations. (It may thus be incumbent upon them to go considerably beyond the required readings.) Part of this latter task will be to suggest questions, or avenues of inquiry, or methodological points the readings raise which might be incorporated into original papers or even doctoral research. Indeed, all students should read with this in mind and come to each class armed with concrete suggestions.

In addition, and also with the aim of facilitating our collective deliberations, all seminar participants must submit one-page reaction papers throughout the semester. Reaction papers should be just that, and no more. They should indicate your reactions to, questions of, and observations about the week’s major required readings. In them you should feel free to raise points of agreement or disagreement you might have with the various authors. The key to this exercise is coming to class prepared with a reaction to some aspect of the week’s readings. These exercises are required, but will not be graded individually. Hard copy should appear in my North Hall mailbox no later than 9:00 a.m. each Wednesday. In addition, at the same time all students should post their papers to the class list via email attachment (polisci919-2-s14@lists.wisc.edu) so that we all have access to them. No reaction paper is required the week you are a discussion leader.

The only other requirement will be a 30-35 page seminar paper. Note that a draft of that paper will be due on Wednesday, 26 March 2014. The draft may either be a preliminary version of the entire paper or, if you prefer, the draft of a section or two of the final paper. (A minimum of 15 pages will, however, be required at that point.) Please post the paper to the class list, but also have two hard copies when you come to class — one for the instructor and one for one of the other seminar participants. Each draft essay will thus receive at least two sets of critical, constructive comments before the submission of the final version. Comments will be due the following week, on Wednesday, 2 April 2014. The final paper is due on the last day of class, Wednesday, 7 May 2014 but will, of course, be welcomed earlier should inspiration strike you before then. **Students should determine the subject of their seminar paper in consultation with the instructor as early in the semester as possible.**
D. Grading Criteria:
  Oral Presentation &
  Overall Weekly Class Participation  30%
  Final, Revised Seminar Paper 70%

Incompletes are the bane of graduate students and will be granted only under the most exceptional circumstances.

E. Readings:
All of the books listed below are required will be used extensively. In theory, the University Book Store and the reserve reading room of the College Library in Helen C. White Hall should have copies available. Obviously, some may wish to purchase certain titles through the internet. Please note that in this context required means that you must read them; it does not mean that you must buy them. The list is lengthy (and expensive), so pick and choose; form anarcho-syndicalist book-buying communes; make use of the reserve reading room; scan and xerox.

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In the course outline which follows, some readings are required (*); others are recommended (#) for those wishing to pursue a subject further. Required books readings should be on three-hour reserve in the College Library at Helen C. White Hall. In addition, some of the recommended articles may be accessed through the following web link: http://users.polisci.wisc.edu/schatzberg/ps919, henceforth abbreviated as [web]. Others may also be accessed directly through MadCat. You may need to access these from a UW email or web address, but the relevant journal articles should then be accessible. To facilitate easy access, I will send electronic copies of this syllabus (in WordPerfect, Word, Adobe pdf, and html) to the classlist. A copy of the syllabus will also be located at [web].

Note as well that the newsletters of the comparative politics and qualitative methods sections of the APSA are often devoted to methodological issues and occasionally feature discussions of political ethnography [http://community.apsanet.org/ComparativePolitics/comparativepoliticssectionnewsletter and http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/cqrm/Newsletters].

F. Course Outline:

**Week 1—Introduction and Organization**  
22 January 2014


**Week 2–Life in the Field**


**Week 3–Psychological Dimensions**

*Also, begin reading Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, which we will discuss next week.
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**Week 4–Framing** 12 February 2014


**Week 5–The Kitchen Table** 19 February 2014


Week 6–Kinship 26 February 2014

*Chapter by Pachirat in Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography*, 143-161.


Week 7–Language 5 March 2014


#Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, eds., *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

#Stanley Fish, “Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes Without Saying, and Other Special Cases,” in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 243-65.


**Week 8–The Visual**

12 March 2014


**SPRING BREAK**

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**Week 9–The Self in Research**

26 March 2014

***DRAFT ESSAYS DUE***


# Katherine Irwin, “Into the Dark Heart of Ethnography: The Lived Ethics and Inequality of Intimate Field Relationships,” *Qualitative Sociology* 29:2 (June 2006): 155-175. [web]


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**Week 10—Critical Comments**

2 April 2014

***CRITICAL COMMENTS ON PAPER DRAFTS DUE***

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**Week 11—Polities in Strange Places**

9 April 2014


* M.G. Schatzberg, “Les complexités de la « démocratie » : la Fédération ougandaise de football en tant que « polity,»” *Politique africaine*, no. 118 (juin 2010), 123-141. [web] Or, for the most recent English language version which is not an exact translation. [web]

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Week 12–Symbols


*Chapters by Jourde and Bayard de Volo in Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography*, 201-236.


Week 13–States


Week 14–Stateless


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#David D. Laitin, Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1886).

**Week 15 7 May 2014**

***PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINAL PAPERS***

*Chapters by Yanow, Schatz in Schatz, ed. Political Ethnography, 275-318.