

CONF 795-001 SYMBOLIC-POLITICS:
Understanding the central role of symbols in conflicts and peace processes

General:

Semester: Fall 2013
Class Time: 12.00—5.00pm on Saturday the 2nd, 9th, and 16th of November
Classroom: Arlington: Founders Hall 481
Instructor: Tobias Greiff

Contact:

Tobias Greiff
3330 N. Washington Blvd,
Truland Building, 5th floor
Office 507
tgreiff@gmu.edu

Seminar overview:

Burning flags, destroyed cultural heritage, or desecrated religious spaces are serious indicators for rising tensions between conflicting groups. Attacks on group symbols can lead to vast outbreaks of open violence, because symbols are entities of meaning at the heart of each group's concept of self. Symbols, we know, are powerful political tools often used to claim rights, mobilize groups, and even legitimize violence. In recent years, however, we have started to recognize the central role of symbols in all stages of conflict and especially their importance in the settlement of conflicts: they become strategic bargaining material in negotiations often used to open up channels for further decisions, they are central pieces in reconciliation and memorialization projects, and finally can even become the basis on which former enemies can build a joined future. In other words symbols can be powerful tools for peace, too. In this way, a holistic understanding of symbols is needed and is maybe more important than ever before because symbolic-politics, as this seminar will discover, may not only be the more cost effective, but also the least destructive way of reducing tensions.

Before we can utilize symbols as tools, however, we need to understand their functions and roles in social interactions, as well as their specific meanings in local contexts. Achieving both is difficult and researching visual artifacts and symbolic acts is a challenging endeavor. The goal of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of symbols as a central part of social interactions through introducing several new perspectives on symbols, from a variety of fields ranging from anthropology to cultural psychology. In a second step several methods of how to capture the meaning behind symbols will be discussed. Because I believe the best way of learning is through experience, through seeing how symbols have been used and researched in the past, this class will combine lecture and practice elements, giving participants a chance to develop important skills in a collective learning environment.

Class schedule:

- I. Day: I.1 Introduction
 Introduction/Syllabus
 Three short stories about symbols from conflict zones
- (break)*
- I. 2 Symbols – entities of meaning
 What are symbols? (Group exercise)
 Symbolic interactionism, ethno-symbolism, and symbolic-politics
 Recent developments through spatial, aesthetic, and cultural turns
- (break)*
- I. 3 Symbols in conflict theories
 Three contemporary conflict theories – Kaufmann, Ross, and Volkan
 Discussion of assignment I. (Short paper)
- II. Day: II.1 Problems, problems, problems...
 Review of core concepts
 Presentations of assignment I. & discussion of problems
- (break)*
- II. 2 Symbol centered research – important tools
 Translating symbols into text – how to make an artifact analysis
 Film and photography – dealing with visual data
- (break)*
- II. 3 Symbols in peace-negotiations
 In class exercises
 Discussion of assignment II. (Group presentation/simulation)
- III. Day: III. 1 Group presentations
 Presentation of assignment II.
 Discussion
- (break)*
- III. 2 Symbols in/and practice
 Building symbols, building memories?
 Symbols in negotiations, interventions, and re-construction projects

(break)

III. 3 Outlook & Evaluation

Discussion of future symbol-based research/practice projects
Evaluation of class

Class requirements:

Final grades will be calculated with the following scheme:

Active class participation:	50 percent
Group presentation/simulation:	30 percent
Short paper:	20 percent

Active class participation: This is a graduate level seminar, and will include an introduction lecture to each topic followed by a facilitated discussion and practical in class exercises. Both discussion and exercises are crucial elements of academic reasoning and important for successful learning experience. You will be expected to do significant preparation outside of class by critically thinking about the different contents explored in class and the assigned texts, and come prepared with your thoughts and critical questions. Active participation in class discussions makes up 50 percent of the final grade.

A note on class readings: Each week of class has a set of required readings, which you will be expected to complete in their entirety and come prepared to discuss. In addition, a list of suggested readings can be found at the end of this syllabus. These readings are not required, and will not count for or against your participation grade, but will significantly help to broaden your understanding of the concepts discussed, and may be useful in completing your homework assignments.

Short Paper: Your first homework will be to perform a symbolic-politics analysis of a chosen conflict episode. Detailed explanation about the nature of the conflict and the different steps of analysis will be made in class. The paper should be around 1000 words (not including references) and is due in class on November 9th 2013. Please bring a hard copy to class so that you can refer to your findings in the discussion AND submit a copy as an email attachment formatted as either .doc, .docx, or any other open format for plagiarism checking (NO .pdfs). Late papers cannot be accepted. The paper will count towards 20 percent of the final grade.

Group Presentation: Your second homework will be to develop a scenario for a peace negotiation under special consideration of symbols and present your findings in class. This will be a group projects in which different ideas derived from your knowledge of the role and functions of symbols shall be applied in a creative way. Detailed instructions

will be given in class. The presentations will be held on XX.XX.XXXX and count as 30 percent of your final grade.

Assessment framework for written assignments

All assignments will be assessed and graded according to the following list of criteria. All points are important to achieve high grades, although the higher ranked criteria hold the most weight.

1. Overall complexity of chosen topic and depth of thought and reasoning
2. Clear reasoning, meaning:
 - a. A clear structure starting with a short introduction leading to a well-crafted thesis with a corresponding lead question
 - b. Strong development of points to support that thesis
 - c. Clarity of argument and conclusion
3. Chosen level of criticism, acknowledgment of one's own role as researcher
4. Efficient and proper use of references and citations
5. Precise and appropriate use of language and technical terminology
6. Overall text flow, special consideration of logical transition between paragraphs
7. Consistency in style of citation
8. Correct spelling, grammar and syntax

Layout for all written assignments:

All written work should be typed, double-spaced, using Times New Roman font size 12pt, with page numbers at the bottom of the page. Please keep the use of bolding and italicizing to a minimum.

Citation style:

Please use Chicago Style with EITHER footnotes or in-text citations and provide a full list of references. Do not use endnotes. Bibliographies will be graded for accuracy as well as diversity of references (do not use all websites, or all articles from one journal).

For an introduction to the Chicago style as well as many examples please visit:
http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism in any form will not be accepted, and plagiarized papers will receive a failing grade. Violations of the Honor Code will be reported. Please review the full University's Honor Code. <http://www.gmu.edu/academics/catalog/9798/honorcod.html#code>

Excerpt from George Mason University's Honor Code:

“II.B Plagiarism encompasses the following:

1. Presenting as one's own the words, the work, or the opinions of someone else without proper acknowledgment.
2. Borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought of someone else without proper acknowledgment.”

Student Writing Center:

For additional support of your written assignments please contact:

The Writing Center at George Mason University

Email: wcenter@gmu.edu

Telephone: 703-993-4491 (Arlington Campus)

Readings for:**I. Day:**

Required:

Geisler, Michael. "Introduction: What Are National Symbols – and What Do They Do to Us?" In *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, edited by Michael Geisler, pp. XIII—XLII. Middlebury: Middlebury College Press, 2005. (available via e-reserve)

Additional:

Mach, Zdzisław. *Symbols, Conflict, and Identity: Essays in Political Anthropology*. Albany: Suny Press, 1993.

II. Day:

Required:

Kaufman, Stuart. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 15—48. (available via e-reserve)

Ross, Marc. *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 63—87. (available via e-reserve)

Volkan, Vamik. *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998, pp. 81—100. (available via e-reserve)

Additional:

Edelman, Murray. *Politics as Symbolic Action. Mass Arousal & Quiescence*. Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1972.

Elder, Charles and Roger Cobb. *The Political Uses of Symbols*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1983.

Kertzer, David. *Politics & Symbols. The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

III. Day:

Required:

Mac Ginty, Roger. The Role of Symbols in Peacemaking. In *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Process*, edited by Mac Ginty, Roger and John Darby, pp. 235—244. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. (available via e-reserve)

Pink, Sarah. *Doing visual ethnography: Images, media, and representation in research*. London: Sage, 2007, pp. 117—140. (available via e-reserve)

Additional:

Prosser, Jon, ed. *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Strong, Mary and Laena Wilder, eds. *Viewpoints: Visual anthropologists at work*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Tagg, John: *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988 [republished by University of Minnesota Press in 1993].

Wright, Terence. *Visual impact: culture and the meaning of images*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008.