

Seen and Not Seen: Twentieth Century U.S. Working Class Narratives, Representations, and the American Dream

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Myth traditionally provides the central drama of any social order. But history offers something vastly different in its ideal form, since it is concerned with change, more an ideology as distinguished from a utopian vision. But the two frequently work hand in hand. Myth provides the drama and history puts the show on the road.

– Warren Susman

If those in charge of our society - politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television - can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves.

– Howard Zinn

Lived socioeconomic realities are in tension with the myth of the American Dream; the idea that if I work hard enough, I will be successful. Class is a slippery identity marker because it is based upon economic realities that can change, unlike one's race or gender. However, economic standing is not as fluid as the myth of meritocracy proclaims it to be, and personal and social problems arise when it is assumed that one is entirely responsible for one's economic wellbeing. In experience, economic standing is a combination of personal efforts and unavoidable social circumstances, which with social factors related to class (family, status, race, citizenship, community, region and schooling), complicate the ability to define oneself and others as a particular class. Social class identity is also influenced by meritocracy through media, politics and cultural forms which broadcast illusions about what is normal, and how people of particular classes live.

To what degree is self-identity or group identity formulated through class? Class is considered a fluid, mobile and even unimportant marker of identity. It is multivalent and often hidden or misidentified, in the U.S. and here at Haverford. What can be said for the lack of study which foregrounds class? Why are students uncomfortable in revealing and discussing their class identity? Is Haverford actually a socioeconomic equalizer?

This seminar examines the ways in which class is articulated through twentieth century U.S. working class narratives in order to tease out why class matters and how it functions in our society. By anchoring the seminar in a chronological trajectory, we will investigate important continuities and disruptions across a variety of narratives. From The Great Migration, to the Depression Era and the labor movement of the 30's, to the Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King's dangerous call to unite black and white workers, to

first wave of feminism as a white middle class movement, to Bruce Springsteen's iconic public persona in the 80's, to the recent elections and the debates surrounding why a large portion of working class people vote Republican, class has been masked and unmasked, defined and (mis)understood in the public sphere. This seminar engages the following questions: How does an investment in meritocracy and the myth of a unified "American" whole mask class identity, with its shifting signifiers and implications? How is class used to unify national identity through politics and the media? What kinds of moral attachments are mapped onto class? What are the ways in which working class people represent themselves, and how are they represented by others? How is class romanticized and stereotyped? Why is the notion of the "everyman" represented by white working class masculinity, a masculinity that is in reality juxtaposed with other sexual and gendered identities? How have notions of class, and class identification and alignment, shifted throughout the 20th century? To what degree can literature and art interrogate notions of class?

This seminar draws upon selections from a range of disciplines, including History, Philosophy, Sociology, History of Art, English, Political Science and Economics.