THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD

Setting:
NYU, Fall 2016
W 3-6:10 p.m.
1 Washington Place, Rm. 601
IDSEM-UG 1268

Instructor:
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DESCRIPTION

This interdisciplinary seminar explores children and childhood in the United States from two vantage points—those of public policy makers and of parents. In what ways does public policy shape children’s lives? What historical trends influence the ways that people parent? What happens when parents disagree with laws or conventions regarding how to parent?

The first half of the course examines common conceptualizations of the child figure historically and today. While all children possess some universal characteristics that transcend time, place and personal circumstance, we can also understand the contemporary child figure to be a social construction, with “childhood” as we know it emerging as a coherent life stage only in the past few centuries. Public policy—laws about labor, education and sexual activity, in particular—have both shaped and responded to these conceptualizations of childhood.

The second half of the course examines children as members of families. Just as we can understand the symbolic child figure as a social construction, so we will see that race, class, gender and sexual orientation are key factors influencing the lived experiences of actual children and their parents. Additionally, we will examine how the proscribed “best methods” of child-rearing seem to change continuously—parents who consult various “experts” often receive contradictory advice.

Sally Mann / Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia (1989)
LEARNING GOALS
By the end of the course, you should have developed:
- A deep understanding of childhood as a social construction
- A mastery of some contentious current issues concerning children
- Improved critical analysis skills

READINGS
The required books, Annette Lareau’s Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, and Neil Postman’s The Disappearance of Childhood, are available at the NYU Bookstore. Readings are available on NYU Classes.

NOTE: You are not permitted to use laptops or other electronic devices during the seminar; you must print out the readings and bring them with you to class!

PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE
This course is a seminar, so please plan to participate fully in discussions. Read everything closely. I suggest that you underline points that interest you and write out a few questions that you want to raise. In the discussions, you should feel free to expand on points with which you agree or to ask questions about statements or points of view that you think are unclear. Of course, you may also disagree with some of the readings or with my comments or those of the other students, but please do so in a way that shows respect for others.

Attendance and promptness are crucial. You are allowed one unexcused absence; additional absences may require written documentation. Repeated absences or chronic lateness will result in a lower and possibly failing grade.

ASSIGNMENTS
You are responsible for the following:
- Reading and being prepared to discuss all of the assigned material
- Writing two short essays. Each essay should be at least 4 full typed double-spaced pages. For the first essay, I will give you three questions; you should answer one. For the second essay, you should put two readings from the syllabus in dialogue with each other, explaining how one supports, complicates, or refutes a main point of the other. You choose the readings to engage. I will hand out specific deadlines and guidelines in the first week or two of classes!
- Writing one research paper; 10-12 typed double-spaced pages, on a relevant topic of your choice. Specific guidelines will be distributed in class and posted on NYU Classes; please let me know if you have questions about them. The proposal should include a one-paragraph description of your project and a bibliography of at least 5 potential sources. (Some of these sources may come from the syllabus.) The research paper itself is due by 5 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 16.

The purpose of all these assignments is to give you the opportunity to demonstrate the following: your knowledge of the readings; your understanding of the (dis)connections between authors’ arguments and methodologies; and your ability to express yourself clearly and succinctly.

GRADING
In general, I will grade you on how well you articulate, develop and support your arguments. This includes keeping your arguments relevant to the questions or issues at hand. I will grade you according to this formula:
- Preparation (i.e. reading!) / Participation / Attendance - 30%
- Short Essays - 30%
- Research Paper - 40%
EXTRA CREDIT

I am happy to give extra credit for substantive and engaging oral presentations. At the beginning of the semester, you may select a text you want to study especially closely and then present on it when we discuss it. If extra credit is awarded, it will range from a raise of one grade on one of your response papers (B to B+, for example) to a raise of one grade for the entire course. Here is what you need to do to prepare for the oral presentation:

1. Choose a piece you want to discuss, read it carefully, and take notes.
2. Come up with one or two ideas that you would like to discuss in your presentation. Remember that the point of the talk is not to recap the plot or thesis of the piece, as we will have read it ourselves; instead, you should plan to expand on a point that you find especially interesting or troubling. What new elements will your oral presentation bring to the discussion?
3. Meet with me to discuss your idea(s).
4. Prepare a 10-minute talk; I do not require that you write this out, and—indeed—presentations usually are best when they are made from an outline; if you do choose to write it out, 10 minutes speaking usually requires 3 double-spaced pages of text.
5. Prepare a brief one-page handout for every member of the class (23 people in all). The handout can take the form of a couple of questions or a very short outline; its purpose is to promote discussion, led by you, after your 10-minute presentation. This handout is separate from whatever notes you use to give your presentation—those are just for you.
6. E-mail the handout to me the day before your presentation so that I can offer suggestions.
7. Prepare a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation, etc., in addition to the hand-out.

GENERAL WARNINGS

- I penalize LATE WORK. If you genuinely are unable to turn in a paper when it is due, please e-mail or phone me immediately to explain the situation. I will then determine a new due date.
- I strongly discourage INCOMPLETES and give them only for well-documented reasons. If I do agree to give you an incomplete, I will set a deadline by which you must submit all remaining work. The deadline most likely will be only 2 or 3 weeks after the last day of class.
- I insist on ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. As a student in a Gallatin course, you belong to an interdisciplinary community of scholars and artists who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin website—www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html—for a full description of the school’s academic integrity policy.

CONCLUSION

Childhood in the United States has a fascinating history—and present!—and so I very much hope that you enjoy this course. Also be assured that I want you to learn and to receive good grades. Please send me an e-mail or make an appointment to meet with me if you feel you are having difficulty with your work in the course. I will offer you all the support I can.
READING SCHEDULE
Please read all the readings prior to class. We will watch the films together in class!

Sept. 7—Introductions to the Course and Each Other

Audio CD: Ghetto Life 101 (LeAlan Jones & Lloyd Newman, 1993; 30 minutes)

Sept. 14—Conceptualizing the Child


Sept. 21—The Emergence and Disappearance of Childhood?

Film: Literacy Lost (Currents, PBS program; c. 1985; 14 min.)

Sept. 28—Children, the Nation & the State

Judith Sealander, excerpts from The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America’s Young in the Twentieth Century (2003): “Introduction” and Ch. 3 “Illusory Promises: State Aid to Poor Children,” 59 pp. total

Oct. 5—Children’s Rights

CLASS SCHEDULE (Continued)

Oct. 12—Children’s Wrongs


Fri., Oct. 14—FIRST ESSAY DUE

Oct. 19—The Politics of Child-Rearing Advice


Oct. 26—Unequal Childhoods?

Annette Lareau, Ch. 1-5 of Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, 2nd ed. (2011):

Nov. 2—Children at Play


Nov. 9—Consuming Children

Film: Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood (Media Education Foundation, 2008; 67 min.)

Fri., Nov. 11—SECOND ESSAY DUE
CLASS SCHEDULE (Continued)

Nov. 16—Panic!

Films: Boys Beware (Dir. Sid Davis, 1961; 10 min.): https://archive.org/details/boys_beware

RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

Nov. 23—HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

Nov. 30—The Fantastical Child


Dec. 7—Children, Sex and Sex Ed

Sinikka Elliott, Ch. 1 & 3 of Not My Kid: What Parents Believe about the Sex Lives of Their Teenagers (2012): “Sex Panics: Debates Over Sex Education and the Construction of Teen Sexuality” and “Negotiating the Erotic: When Parents and Teens Talk about Sex,” 27 pp. total

Dec. 14—The Knowing Child?

Films: What Remains (Dir. Steven Cantor, 2006; 80 min.)
“Place” an episode of Art in the Twenty-First Century (Prod. PBS, 2001; 14 min.):
http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/sally-mann

Fri., Dec. 16—RESEARCH PAPER DUE