THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD

Setting:
NYU Summer Session II, 2012
M, W 6-9 p.m.
1 Washington Place, Rm. 527
IDSEM-UG 1268

Instructor:
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Office hours: M 4:30-5:30 or by appointment

DESCRIPTION
This interdisciplinary seminar examines the ways that society has imbued children and childhood with meanings that are simultaneously symbolic and political.

I have structured the course so that we begin our study broadly and gradually grow more specific. We start by examining the sociological phenomenon of the moral panic. Put simply, children are often the putative objects of concern of panics, even though their well-being may not actually be at risk. Next, we will see that "childhood" as we understand it emerged as a coherent life stage only in the past few centuries and that many current cultural assumptions about children are the result of larger social anxieties of the Romantic and Victorian eras. From here, the course becomes more specialized, focusing on four broad and highly contested topics: gender identity, sexual activity, national identity, and education.

Throughout the course, we will focus on adult expressions of concern over the worth, safety and happiness of children’s lives. We also will study how children understand and represent themselves. A continual issue in the course is the extent to which such expressions are motivated by genuine worry for children’s well-being, by crass political maneuvering, or by some combination of the two.

By the end of the course, we should have deeper understandings of childhood as a historical construction and of the debates surrounding some of the issues that society currently deems relevant to children.
READINGS
The required books, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*, are available at the NYU Bookstore. Readings are available on Blackboard.

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 (possibly failing) grade.

ASSIGNMENTS
You are responsible for the following:
- Reading and being prepared to discuss all of the assigned material
- Writing two response papers—one for Donovan’s *I’ll Get There*, the other for Postman’s *Disappearance*. Each should be 2-3 typed double-spaced pages and should explain how the book supports, complicates, or refutes a main point of one other reading from the syllabus. You choose the other readings to engage.
- Writing one research paper; 10-12 typed double-spaced pages, on a relevant topic of your choice. Specific guidelines are posted separately on Blackboard; please let me know if you have questions about them. You should submit a paper proposal on July 23. 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 on Thursday, Aug. 9.

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:
- Participation / Attendance - 30%
- Response Papers - 30%
- Research Paper - 40%
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. The extra credit 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. Read the piece you want to discuss 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.
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 (21 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. (You may also make a PowerPoint presentation, etc., but please make a hand-out as well.)
6. E-mail the handout to me the day before your presentation so that I can offer suggestions.

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.
- 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 artists and scholars 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 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.
READING SCHEDULE

Mon., July 2—Introductions to the Course and Each Other

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

Mon., July 9—Panic


Wed., July 11—The “Rights” of Children


Mon., July 16—Children in History I


Wed., July 18—Children in History II

Steven Mintz, Chaps. 15-17 from Huck’s Raft: “Youthquake,” “Parental Panics and the Reshaping of Childhood,” and “The Unfinished Century of the Child,” 74 pp. total

Mon., July 23—Children and Gender Identity

Film: Sex: Unknown (Nova, BBC / WGBH Boston; 2001; 60 minutes)

RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSAL DUE
CLASS SCHEDULE (cont.)

Weds., July 25—Children and Sexual Activity


**FIRST RESPONSE PAPER DUE**

Mon., July 30—Education


Wed., Aug. 1—Children and National Identity

Film: *Going Home* (Dir. Jason Hoffmann, 2009; 73 min.)

Mon., Aug. 6—The Disappearance of Childhood


**SECOND RESPONSE PAPER DUE**

Wed., Aug. 8—The Knowing Child?

Film: *What Remains* (Dir. Steven Cantor, 2006; 80 min.)

Thurs., Aug. 9—**RESEARCH PAPER DUE**