



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

## COURSE SYLLABUS

### Representations and Cultural Practices

2526-2-E4001N116

---

#### Learning objectives

The aim of the course is to provide students with a set of theoretical and practical tools to understand and analyze the social organization of contemporary cultural worlds in both their practical and discursive dimensions.

1. Knowledge and understanding: a solid introduction to the theories and key concepts of contemporary cultural studies, with particular attention to the symbolic dimensions of power.
2. Applied knowledge and understanding: tools for critically analyzing cultural representations and practices within specific social contexts.
3. Independent judgment: the ability to critically reflect on contemporary cultural phenomena and take a well-argued position.
4. Communication skills: the ability to present theoretical concepts and the results of cultural analysis in both written and oral form.
5. Learning skills: development of a critical and reflective study method aimed at fostering autonomous learning

#### Contents

The course is divided into three parts:

1. An introduction to the main contemporary theories in the field of cultural studies, with particular focus on the role of power.
2. An analysis of the processes involved in the construction of cultural boundaries.
3. A study of the logics and social organization of creativity, with a focus on the worlds of art and science.

## Detailed program

The course is structured in four parts. It introduces the main contemporary theories in the field of cultural studies through a critical analysis of contributions from various disciplines — from sociology to anthropology, from the philosophy of social sciences to cultural history. In the final section, the socio-cultural analytical approach will be applied to a specific contemporary social phenomenon.

The first part addresses the interpretation of social action, focusing on the relationship between the cultural construction of bodies and symbolic power. We will ask what it means to speak of “individual behavior” and to what extent we are free to act and to intervene collectively to change certain courses of action.

The second part is dedicated to deconstructing the concept of cultural identity, with particular attention to boundary-work and the role played by power mechanisms at both the subjective and institutional levels. We will explore themes such as the mask, cultural difference, and visual representations of categories of belonging.

The third part examines two specific fields of cultural production, engaging in a critical analysis of artistic and scientific forms of knowledge. We will compare different modes of the “social organization of truth” produced within these two social domains.

The fourth part of the course is dedicated — through in-depth case studies, practical exercises, and collective discussions — to the analysis of cultural representations and practices related to a specific contemporary social phenomenon defined during the first three parts. The aim here is to critically discuss the current state of cultural research on this phenomenon, both in Italy and internationally, and to test the analytical categories introduced earlier in the course.

## Prerequisites

Basic knowledge of the main theories and issues in the cultural sociology and communication processes

## Teaching methods

Classroom lectures; seminar activities; in-class discussion of texts and audiovisual materials. The course consists of 56 hours in total:

60% lecture-based teaching (frontal lessons supported by multimedia materials);

40% interactive teaching (discussions, group work, practical exercises);

Up to 30% of the total hours may be delivered remotely, in accordance with the program guidelines.

## Assessment methods

Three alternative assessment tracks are available, to be chosen by the student:

### **Track A – Active (attending students with presentations and final paper)**

Participation in group seminar presentations in class.

Critical discussion of readings in class and a monographic essay on two authors.

Final individual paper (8–10 pages), on a topic agreed upon with the instructor.

Assessment: Class presentation (30%), monographic essay (20%), final paper (50%).

### **Track B – Observational (attending students with written exam)**

Participation in lectures without classroom presentations.

Study of course packet + one supplementary book chosen from the list under “readings discussed in class.”

Assessment: Final written exam with open-ended questions on the course packet and selected book (100%).

### **Track C – Non-attending students**

Independent study of the texts listed under “readings not discussed in class.”

Assessment: Final written exam with open-ended questions (100%).

### **Assessed competences:**

Theoretical knowledge and critical thinking (all formats);

Ability to apply knowledge (presentation and final paper);

Independent judgment and communication skills (presentation and final paper);

Learning ability (all formats).

### **Grading criteria:**

Grades are expressed on a 30-point scale, with attention to theoretical rigor, clarity and appropriateness of sociological vocabulary, and critical autonomy.

### **Alignment with learning objectives:**

All assessment formats are designed to evaluate integrated acquisition of the following competences: understanding, application, autonomy, communication, and learning.

## **Textbooks and Reading Materials**

### **Course reader with in-class commentary**

Course reader *Representations and Cultural Practices, A.Y. 2025–2026* (available for order at FronteRetro copy shop, Viale Sarca 191. To pre-order: <https://www.fronte-retro.it/dispense.html>), including the following essays (or selected excerpts) in Italian translation.

1. Strand, M., & Spillman, L. (2021). Cultural sociology. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory*, 2, 43–62.

### **PART I. Individual, Behavior, and Power: Studying Practices**

2. Schutz, A. (1955). *Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality*. Rome: Armando, pp. 25–59; orig. ed. in *Collected Papers*, vol. II, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971 (1955).
3. Douglas, M. (1966). *Pollution in the Profane Sphere*. In *Purity and Danger*. Bologna: il Mulino, pp. 57–73; orig. ed. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.
4. Elias, N. (1982). *Changes in Aggressiveness as Pleasure*. In *The Civilizing Process*. Bologna: il Mulino, pp. 351–368; orig. ed. *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969.
5. Foucault, M. (1975). *The Means of Correct Training*. In *Discipline and Punish*. Turin: Einaudi, pp. 186–212; orig. ed. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.
6. Ginzburg, C. (1979). *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*. In *Miti, emblemi, spie*. Turin: Einaudi, pp. 143–180.

### **PART II. The Dilemma of Cultural Identity and Boundary Work**

7. Hall, S. (1996). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (pp. 392–403). Routledge.
8. Said, E. W. (1999). An Imaginary Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Orient. In *Orientalism*. Milan: Feltrinelli, pp. 56–78; orig. ed. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
9. Hobsbawm, E. J. (1983). The Invention of Tradition. In Hobsbawm, E. J., & Ranger, T. (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–17.
10. Pizzorno, A. (2005). Essay on the Mask. In *Studi culturali*, no. 1, pp. 85–109.
11. Goffman, E. (1977). The Ritualization of Femininity. Orig. ed. *La ritualisation de la féminité*. In *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 14, pp. 37–50.

### **PART III. Art and Science: Creativity as Practice and Representation**

12. Baxandall, M. (2001). The Eye of the Quattrocento. In *Painting and Social Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Turin: Einaudi, pp. 41–103 (excerpts); orig. ed. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. Oxford University Press, 1972.
13. Fine, G. A. (2006). Through a Glass Darkly: Weather Forecasting and the Promises of “Future Work.” In *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, no. 2, pp. 215–247.
14. Bourdieu, P. (2003). A World Apart. In *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Milan: Feltrinelli, pp. 47–106 (excerpts); orig. ed. *Science de la science et réflexivité*. Paris: Raison d’agir, 2001.
15. Swedberg, R. (2020). Using Metaphors in Sociology: Pitfalls and Potentials. In *The American Sociologist*, 51, pp. 240–257.

### **PART IV. Forms of Critique: Practices and Representations of Cultural Criticism**

16. Carbone, L., Mijs, J., Van Dooremalen, T., Daenekindt, S. (2024). Toward a Sociology of Recurring Events: Constellations of Cultural Change around Eurovision in 18 Countries (1981–2021). *Poetics*, 104.
17. Illouz, E. (2008). The Triumph of Suffering. In *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. University of California Press, pp. 152–196.
18. Boltanski, L. (2019). *Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Investigations: The Theme of Conspiracy in Political Metaphysics*. Working Paper Series, Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation, no. 7, June 2019.

#### **Plus the following text:**

Domaneschi, L. (2025). *Teorie della pratica. La svolta prasseologica nella teoria culturale contemporanea*. Meltemi.

#### **Material not discussed in class**

1. Boltanski, L. (2025). *Enigmi e complotti. Un’inchiesta sulle inchieste*. Meltemi Editore.
2. Illouz, E. (2025). *Modernità esplosiva. Il disagio della civiltà delle emozioni*. Turin: Einaudi.
3. Wacquant, L. (2024). *L’invenzione dell’underclass. Storia di un mito urbano*. ETS.

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

QUALITY EDUCATION | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION | CLIMATE ACTION

---