

Bob Dylan and the 60s: Lineages of the American Present

Responsible Faculty Instructor:

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Assistant Professor

Credits: 4

Credits Type: BA

Cross-registration:

Pre-requisites: Interest in Bob Dylan's work and Contemporary American Politics

COURSE DESCRIPTION (COURSE VISION):

Bob Dylan and the 60s: Lineages of the American Present looks at the folk music revival of the mid-20th century and its aftermath as indispensable to understanding the deep political and cultural divisions that define the United States today. This course will attempt to trace a lineage from the dustbowl ballads of Woody Guthrie in the 1940s to the “Culture Wars” of the present. The world of folk music was not merely a soundtrack to history, but a primary battleground where competing visions of the nation’s soul were fought over.

We begin by studying folk music’s historical embeddedness as a fellow traveller for collective, socialist political organizing in the United States. In the hands of Guthrie and Pete Seeger, songs like “This Land Is Your Land” were radical assertions of a people’s America, challenging the injustices of capitalism and asserting a communitarian ideal. The Cold War 1950s transformed this tradition. Sheltered in bohemian enclaves like Greenwich Village, folk became a language of ‘authenticity’ and rebellion against mainstream values, a transition embodied by the rise of Bob Dylan.

From this point on, the course analyses the escalating dialectic between rebellion and reaction. The early 1960s witnessed the peak of the radical impulse, as the folk revival’s political energy merged with the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left. This posed a direct challenge to the established racial and political order. The state and conservative forces responded with a mixture of coercion (police violence, surveillance) and co-optation, setting the stage for a broader cultural confrontation.

This dialectic intensified with the movement’s own evolution. The shift symbolized by Bob Dylan’s embrace of electric music—a move from explicit protest to poetic ambiguity and individual liberation—represented a deepening of the challenge. The counterculture attacked not just specific policies but also the ideological foundations of bourgeois society: its rationality, its work ethic, and its moral codes. This provoked a more profound and systematic backlash. Richard Nixon’s “law and order” rhetoric explicitly targeted both political radicalism and cultural dissent, framing them as twin threats to the nation.

The subsequent decades are defined by this dialectic’s aftermath. The utopian energies of the 60s were commodified and fragmented, but the conservative counter-movement, far from disintegrating, consolidated its gains. It evolved into building a counter-identity around

traditional values, patriotic nationalism, anti-socialism, and a rejection of the 60s legacy. The course culminates by arguing that the contemporary Culture Wars and the MAGA movement are the continuities of this decades-long struggle.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY:

This is a course that will examine varied archival material to delve into the themes of the Course Modules. This includes Song Recordings, Photographs, Film clips, Speeches, and even Testimonies. Students will be expected to do the weekly readings and thereby help the classes to be more dialogic, although we will also be deploying the lecture/presentation mode often.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Analyse the political and aesthetic evolution of the American folk revival, tracing its trajectory from a collectivist, labour-oriented movement to a symbol of individual artistic expression.
- Critically evaluate the core concepts of "authenticity," "protest," and "the folk" as contested ideological constructs, rather than natural or stable categories.
- Connect the historical conflicts of the folk revival and the civil rights movement to contemporary American political and cultural debates, articulating the long-term legacy of the "culture wars" from the 1960s to the present.

READING LIST:**Discography**

Dylan, Bob. *Bringing It All Back Home* (Album).
Highway 61 Revisited (Album).
The Times They Are A-Changin' (Album).

Guthrie, Woody. *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Album).

Selections from the following Books

1. Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.
2. Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*.
3. Garman, Bryan. *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*.
4. Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*.
5. Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.
6. Lieberman, Robbie. *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950*.

7. Marqusee, Mike. *Chimes of Freedom. Bob Dylan and the 1960s.*
8. Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right.*
9. Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America.*
10. Rossinow, Doug. *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America.*

Speeches

Nixon, Richard. *"The Silent Majority" Speech* (Nov 3, 1969).
Seeger, Pete. *HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) Testimony.*

WEEKLY READING PLAN (WEEKLY OUTLINE):

Weeks 1, 2

Module 1: Woody Guthrie and the Folk-Socialist Tradition

Popular Front politics, Labor movement, Dust Bowl ballads, People's music, Almanac Singers, Communist party cultural work

1. Guthrie, Woody. *Dust Bowl Ballads.* (Album)
2. Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century.*
3. Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory.*
4. Garman, Bryan. *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen.*
5. Reuss, Richard A., with JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957.*

Weeks 3,4

Module 2: The Cold War and the Politics of the Folk Revival

McCarthyism and blacklisting, Beat Generation influence, Greenwich Village Scene, Folk revival, *Authenticity*, Acoustic idealism

1. Pete Seeger's *HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee) Testimony*
2. Lieberman, Robbie. *"My Song Is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950.*

Weeks 5,6**Module 3: *Which Side Are You On?* Folk Music and the New Left**

Civil Rights Movement, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), March on Washington, Protest singer as icon, Topical songwriting.

1. Dylan, Bob. *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (Album).
2. Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*.
3. Wilentz, Sean. *Bob Dylan in America* (Chapters 1-3).
4. Mike Marqusee. *Chimes of Freedom. Bob Dylan and the 1960s*.

Weeks 7,8**Module 4: Dylan, Electricity, and the Crisis of Political Art**

Newport Folk Festival 1965, The politics of the Electric Guitar, Individualism, Artistic freedom, The Black Power movement, Fragmentation of the left.

1. Dylan, Bob. *Bringing It All Back Home / Highway 61 Revisited* (Albums).
2. Marcus, Greil. *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*.
3. Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.
4. Rossinow, Doug. *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*.

Weeks 9,10**Module 5: "The Slow Train to Nowhere": Co-optation and Backlash**

Nixon's "Silent Majority", Law and Order politics, Co-optation, Disillusionment, Criminalisation of Protest

1. Nixon, Richard. *The Silent Majority Speech* (Nov 3, 1969).
2. Wolfe, Tom. *The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening*. (Magazine Article)
3. Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*.
4. Frith, Simon. *The Sociology of Rock*.
5. Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*

Weeks 11, 12, 13

Module 6: Criminalization of Protest and the Birth of a New American Fault Line

Reaganism, "Culture War", Anti-protest legislation; Political 'correctness' debates, the Alt-right, Trumpism, Culture Wars.

1. Buchanan, Pat. *1992 Republican National Convention Speech* ("Culture War" speech).
2. Perlstein, Rick. *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*.
3. Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.
4. Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*.

Week 14

Revision and Discussions