

**Mourning in America:**  
History and Culture in the 1980s

Dr. Yoav Fromer

MTV, Atari Game Systems, Crazy hairdos, lame pop music and a Hollywood President who can't stop smiling: Scholars still consider the 1980s as a relatively benign period of national regeneration that solidified a conservative revolution. After the traumatic 1960s-1970s, many Americans agreed that, indeed, "It's Morning in America" as Ronald Reagan's catchy 1984 reelection slogan put it. But the astounding electoral success of Trump three decades later forces us to reassess the import and impact of this rather misunderstood period: after all, Trump is *also* a quintessential product of the 1980s and therefore the problems, forces and failures that fueled his remarkable ascension may be found in the developments of this era. The course will critically reassess the 1980s through a variety of disciplines (history, literature, sociology, political science, film, music) and explore, among other things: Reaganomics, Neoliberalism and the financialization of the economy; the culmination and finale of the Cold War; "Yuppie" consumer culture; Multiculturalism, Postmodernism and the "Canon Wars" in universities; the Crack Epidemic and mass incarceration of African Americans; Aids crisis and Gay Politics; Anti-abortion movement and failure of the Equal Rights Amendment; the origins of America's "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and the fear of American Decline.

**Grading and Assignments**

In-Class Midterm Exam: 30%

Final Paper: 50%

In-Class Participation: 20%

**Attendance**

Showing up to class is mandatory and attendance will be taken. You are allowed **3 unexcused absences**; more than that will incur a penalty on the final grade.

**Assignments**

Weekly assignments include 20-25 pages of reading and a viewing assignment (approximately 1-2 hours). All materials will be provided through moodle.

Week 1: Introduction – The Legacy of the 1980s: Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and the Making of Modern America

Week 2: The End of the New Deal and the Election of Ronald Reagan

Readings: Thomas and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction* (excerpt)

Watch: Reagan's Inaugural Address (1981)

Week 3: Reaganomics I – "Trickle Down Economics" (or: Neoliberalism)

Readings: Jack Kemp, Campaign Address for Ronald Reagan"; Jude Wannisky, "The Two Santa Clause Theory"

Watch: Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*

Week 4: The Cold War I – "The Evil Empire"

Readings: John Lewis Gaddis, *A New History of the Cold War*, chapter 6

Watch: *Red Dawn* (1984)

Week 5: Money for Nothing – Yuppies, Computers and Celebrity Culture

Readings: Louis Menand, "Triumph of Trumpery," *New Republic* (1988), David Foster Wallace, "Little Expressionless Animals"

Watch: *The Big Chill* (1983)

Week 6: War on Drugs, War on Crime, War on Welfare: Racism and the Ghetto

Readings: Loic Wacquant, "From slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review*  
David Farber, *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism and the Decade of Greed*, chapters 1,5

Watch: Short Documentary about the Crack Epidemic and Hip Hop

Week 7: The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Triumph of the Moral Majority

Readings: Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (introduction), Jerry Falwell, *Listen America*, (introduction)

Watch: *Flashdance* (1983)

Week 8: Multiculturalism, Political Correctness, and the "Canon Wars"

Readings: Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind* (excerpts), Louis Menand on Bloom, *New Republic* (1987)

Week 9: Reaganomics II – "Greed is Good"?

Readings: *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (entire play)

Watch: *Wall Street* (1988)

Week 10: The Aids Epidemic, Crisis of Masculinity, and Gay Rights

Readings: Susan Sontag, "The Way We Live Now," *New Yorker*, 24 Nov., 1986

Watch: *Angels in America* (episode 1)

Week 11: From Beirut to Kabul – American Empire and International Terrorism

Readings: Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (excerpts), Bob Woodward, *The Veil: The CIA's Secret Wars, 1981-1987* (Prologue)

Week 12: Rethinking the End of the Cold War

John Ikenberry and Daniel Duedney, "Who Won the Cold War?" *Foreign Policy*

Week 13: The "Japanese Invasion" and the Discourse of American Decline

Readings: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, chapter 8

Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* (1989)