SOCIOLOGY 125

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

FALL 2006

Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:30-3:45
6210 Social Science

Professor Erik Olin Wright

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2-4 or by appointment
Course Description

What kind of country do we live in? What does it even mean to talk about a “kind” of country? We all know what it means to ask of a strange creature “what kind of animal is this?” But it is less clear how to ask the same question of a society. The question is muddied further by the fact that societies can change. A leopard can’t change its spots. But a society can become more or less productive in the organization of its economy, more or less equal in its distribution of opportunity, more or less democratic.

This course provides an extended answer to the question of what kind of a country the United States is. It also explores the implications of that answer for understanding, and making progress in solving, some of the social problems that confront America today. Our discussion revolves around three key values that most Americans believe our society should realize:

- **Efficiency** – the idea that the economy allocates scarce resources in ways that reflect social values, is driven by “free choice” among consumers, and uses inputs to maximum advantage
- **Fairness** – the idea that we live in a land of equal opportunity and justice, without unfair privileges and disadvantages.
- **Democracy** – the idea that our public decisions reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than those of powerful elites

Our basic question is: *To what degree does contemporary American society realize these values, and how might it do a better job?* A second but important question for us is: *How do social scientists go about answering such questions?*

Readings, Requirements, and Grading

Most of the readings for the course are in a photocopied reader that is available at the Social Science Copy Center. There are also two required books which are available at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman Street:

- Steven Hill, *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy* (PoliPointPress, 2006)

Copies of all readings will be on reserve at H.C. White Library.
Lectures, Readings, Discussion Sections, film series: Students are expected to show up for every class and discussion section and do every reading, and view the films being shown in the evening film series (see below for details). If you have a problem of any kind with attendance, let your TA know what’s up. If you have a problem getting a hold of any of the required readings, let your TA know. If you have any questions about anything else, first talk with your TA.

Film series: We are showing a film series of four documentary films in conjunction with this class. The films will be treated like readings: they are a required part of the course and there will be questions on the exams about the films. On the weeks in which the films are shown, we will have two screenings – one on Tuesday evening at 7:00 and a second on Wednesday evening at 7:00. A full schedule with room numbers will be handed out in class. The movies will also be available at the H.C. White Media Center for individual viewing.

Exams: There will three exams in this course: two mid-terms and a final. The final will focus heavily on material covered since the second mid-term, but will also include questions on the most important ideas explored in earlier parts of the course. The exams will be a combination of short answer and multiple choice. They are NOT designed to test for creativity in answers. Their purpose is only to test your mastery of the material covered. The dates for the exams are:

- Midterm #1 Wednesday, October 11
- Midterm #2 Monday, November 13
- Final Friday, December 22 @ 5:05 p.m.

Grading: Your grade will be determined by performance on the exams and attendance and participation in discussion sections. The midterm exams will each count for 25 percent of your grade; the final for 35 percent; and your performance in section for 15 percent.
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9/6</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>What kind of a country is this?</td>
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Part I. Efficiency

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<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/13</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>The market: how it is supposed to work</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9/18</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>The market: How it actually works</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9/20</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>The market: How it actually works</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>9/25</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>The environment</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>9/27</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>10/2</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Consumerism</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>10/4</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10/9</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>High Road Capitalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>10/11</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Midterm #1</td>
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Part II. Fairness

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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>10/16</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>10/18</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Economic Inequality: persistent poverty</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>10/23</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Economic Inequality: increasing inequality</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>10/25</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Economic Inequality: what can be done?</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>10/30</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Racial Inequality</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>11/1</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Racial Inequality, continued</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>11/6</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Gender inequality</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>11/8</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Gender inequality</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>11/13</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Midterm #2</td>
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Part III. Democracy

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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>11/15</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Capitalist Democracy : how it works</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>11/20</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Capitalist Democracy, continued</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>11/22</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Democracy and Taxation</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>11/27</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Voting, parties, electoral rules, Campaign finance</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>11/29</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Democracy and Corporate Media</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>12/4</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Militarism &amp; Empire</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Unions and Democracy</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>12/11</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Democracy from below</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>The Big Lessons from the Course</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>12/22</td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Final Examination</td>
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* all films will be screened on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at 7:00
Reading Assignments

1. Wednesday 9/6  Introduction to the Course
   no reading assignment

2. Monday 9/11  What kind of a country is this?

   **Part I. Efficiency**

3. Wednesday 9/13  The market: how it is supposed to work

4. Monday 9/18  The market: How it actually works
5. Wednesday 9/20  The market: How it actually works, continued


7. Wednesday 9/27    Transportation


8. Monday 10/2    Consumerism

[9] *Do Americans Shop too Much?* By Juliet Schor pp. 1-52

9. Wednesday 10/4    Health Care


10. Monday 10/9    Building “high road” capitalism


WEDNESDAY 10/11    MIDTERM #1
Part II. Fairness

11. Monday 10/16  Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness


12. Wednesday 10/18  Economic Inequality: persistent poverty


Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, Field Guide to the U.S. Economy, chapter 2, pp. 19-34, chapter 6, pp. 91-108

13. Monday 10/23  Economic Inequality: explaining increasing inequality


[18] Barry Bluestone, “The Inequality Express” The American Prospect: online edition, 12.01.95


14. Wednesday 10/25  Economic Inequality: alternatives


15. **Monday 10/30**  
Racial Inequality

16. **Wednesday 11/1**  
Racial Inequality, continued


17. **Monday 11/6**  
Gender inequality

18. **Wednesday 11/8**  
Gender inequality, continued


**MONDAY 11/13**  
**MIDTERM #2**
Part III. Democracy

19. Wednesday 11/15 Capitalist Democracy: how it works
20. Monday 11/20 Capitalist Democracy: how it works, continued


21. Wednesday 11/22 Capitalist Democracy and Taxation


Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, Field Guide, Chapter 5, 73-90


Steven Hill, 10 Steps to Repair American Democracy (PoliPointPress, 2006) pp. 1-16, 35-88, 137-152


[34] Bruce Ackerman & Ian Ayres, Voting with Dollars: A New Paradigm for Campaign Finance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Chapters 1-2 (“Reforming Reform,” “Patriot”), pp. 3-24

23. Wednesday 11/29  Democracy and Corporate Media


24. Monday 12/4  Militarism & Empire


25. Wednesday 12/6  Unions and Democracy

[38] The Silent War: The Assault on Workers’ Freedom to Choose a Union and Bargain Collectively in the United States (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 2002). 23 pages


26. Monday 12/11  Democracy from below


27. Wednesday 12/13  Imagining alternative futures & The Big Lessons of the Course