American Society: how it really works (Revised v1.1)
Sociology 125 - Fall 2014 – University of Wisconsin, Department of Sociology
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30-10:45 AM in Social Science 6112

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Course Description

What kind of country do we live in? This course provides an extended answer to the question of what kind of a country we live in. It also explores the implications of that answer for understanding, and making progress in solving, some of the social problems that confront America today.

To approach the question of what kind of country we live in, this class will be organized 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?*

The course is organized into three large sections corresponding to each of the three values. Within each section we will examine what the value means and how it is expressed in contemporary American society. The goal of this course is to provide you with “tools” for thinking about contemporary American society that will help you think through the complexity and make sense of what is important.

What is important? We start with values because they are deeply felt and subjective attitudes about what we think is important. Most often they are so deeply felt that we do not think about them and take them for granted. This gives them their power – such taken for granted attitudes inform how we think about the world and the types of decisions that we make. They are important to politics and under-pin many ideological differences that manifest in political debate. Most often, however, it is not that different political positions have different values as
much as there is disagreement over what values mean and which values should be given priority in a certain situation.

We will find that many times these three values come into conflict. It may be difficult to realize the value of efficiency while simultaneously ensuring democracy and fairness. At other times, compromises must be made to fairness to ensure democracy. The goal of the class is to recognize these tensions and compromises and to start to think about alternatives. Are there other ways to fulfill these values? On what occasions should one value outweigh another important value? Inherent in this line of thinking is the notion important in the social sciences, and particularly sociology, that human beings create the social world that we live in. Sociologists tend to reject the notion that human society is “natural” or inevitable. Rather, social relationships are subject to change and revision. This class will challenge you to think about the types of changes that you think are important and what things you think ought to stay the same.

Course Requirements
Students are expected to show up for and participate in every class having completed the readings. If you have a problem of any kind with attendance, let me know what's up.

Reading - There is one required book for the course: American Society: How it Really Works, by Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (W.W. Norton, 2010). This is available at the Rainbow Book Store (426 West Gilman Street, Madison, WI 53703-1009; 608-257-6050).

Wright and Rogers have arranged with Rainbow to reduce the cost of new copies of American Society purchased there by what they would ordinarily get (pre-tax!) in royalties (about $4.50). This arrangement is not available with any other bookstore and I have made no arrangements for American Society availability elsewhere, but you can certainly find it at many bookstores and online.

A reserve copy of American Society will be available at the Helen C. White Library.

There are also a few supplementary readings and videos that are available for free through the learn@UW website for this course. Heavy emphasis will be placed on discussion of these readings in class. Students are expected to have completed the readings and watched the videos prior to class.

Updated figures and tables for the American Society book have been uploaded to the course website under the “content” tab.

Policy Brief – Students will craft a policy brief that identifies and describes an issue of public concern and then proposes a set of policies designed to remedy the problem. Identification and description of the problem, including the mechanisms involved in or reasons for the problem, should be well researched, drawing on class materials as well as other high-quality sources. Proposed policies should be “reasonable,” by which I mean policies that could be enacted in theory even if in the current climate it seems unlikely. Briefs should also provide a “policy analysis,” which considers the likely effectiveness of the proposed solutions, any possible negative repercussions or side-effects, and what kind of political/cultural/economic
conditions that would have to prevail for the policy to be effective. You may wish to think about what it would take to create the right conditions.

Evaluation will be based on the following criteria:

- A clearly defined, well-researched problem, including an analysis of the mechanisms through which the problem is created
- Use of appropriate evidence.
- Persuasive connection between the problem and proposed policy
- Clarity of the policy analysis
- “Details:” citations, writing, proofreading, evidence of effort and care, etc.

The policy brief will be 5-6 pages, double-spaced, normal fonts and margins. Don’t try to game the document set-up. That’s annoying. This assignment is worth 15% of your final grade and will be due in class December 4.

**Exams** – There will be two mid-terms and one in-class final. The exams will be a combination of short-answer and short essay questions. The exams are not cumulative. Each exam is worth 20% of your final grade.

**Attendance, Participation, Quizzes, and Reading Interrogations** – Students are required to attend class having read the assigned material for the day. Speaking in class will enhance your grade.

**Quizzes** – Short quizzes will be given at the beginning of each class to assess reading comprehension. If you have read, you will find these quizzes easy. Do the reading. Quizzes are worth 10% of your final grade.

**Interrogations**: Each week a set of students in the class will prepare short written “interrogations”, 150-300 words long, engaging some theme or problem in the reading. These interrogations should NOT be summaries or exegeses of the texts; nor should they be mini-essays with extended commentaries on the readings. The point is to pose focused questions that will serve as the basis for the seminar discussion. As you do the reading each week, think about an issue that you really want discussed and clarified, and then formulate an interrogation to set up that discussion. While you will need to explicate each question you pose – that is, lay out what you see are the issues in play in the question, explain what you mean by it, etc. – you do not need to stake out a position with respect to the issues you raise (although you can do this if you want to). The important thing is to pose a clear question that you want to discuss. It is entirely appropriate for questions to focus on ideas, arguments, or passages that you do not understand. It often turns out that questions mainly concerned with asking for clarification of some obscure formulation in the reading provoke especially good discussions in the class. What you should avoid is a list of unelaborated questions or mere summarization.

- Students will write 5 interrogations over the course of the semester.
- Students submitting interrogations will lead-off class discussion of those readings.
- Interrogations are due to me (via the drop box at Learn@UW) no later than 3pm on the day before class. There are no exceptions or make-up for late interrogations.
- Please contact me immediately if you have a scheduling conflict.
The due dates for reading interrogations are noted in the lecture and reading schedule below. The capital letters (A through E) correspond to the letter assigned to you on the first day of class. Interrogations are worth 10% of your final grade.

**Grading:**
Your grade will be determined by performance on the exams, final paper, and attendance and participation.

- Midterms: 40% (20% each)
- Final: 20%
- Policy Brief: 15%
- Participation, Interrogations, and Quizzes: 25%

This is the grading scale employed in the class:

- A = 94%-100%, AB = 88%-93%, B = 83%-87%, BC = 78%-82%, C = 70%-77%,
- D = 60%-69%, F = 59% or below.

**Other Business**
Please familiarize yourself with the learn@UW website for the course. In addition to hosting a digital version of the reader, I will also post lecture slides, videos, and the occasional announcement or news item.

*If you require alternative arrangements for classes or exams due to a disability or religious observances, please come speak with me as soon as possible.*

Naturally, academic misconduct will not be tolerated. I take this very seriously. You are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic misconduct. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask and/or familiarize yourself with University policies (see: [http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html](http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html)) as well as my policies on academic misconduct available on the course website.

**LECTURE AND READING SCHEDULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125**

- **2-SEP** INTRODUCTION
  - W/R, Chapter 1

- **4-SEP** WHAT KIND OF A COUNTRY IS THIS?
  - W/R, Chapter 2
  - C. Wright Mills – excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination*

- **PART I. CAPITALISM**
- **9-SEP** THE MARKET: HOW IT IS SUPPOSED TO WORK (A)
  - W/R Chapter 3
  - Excerpts from Ayn Rand:
    - “From Roarks’s Speech”
    - “Why Selfishness?”
“From John Galt’s Speech”

11-SEP THE MARKET: HOW IT ACTUALLY WORKS (B)
  • W/R, Chapter 4
  • Kimeldorf et al.: “Consumers with a conscience: Will they Pay More?”

16-SEP TRANSPORTATION (C)
  • W/R, Chapter 6

18-SEP THE ENVIRONMENT (D)
  • W/R, Chapter 5

23-SEP HEALTH CARE (E)
  • W/R, Chapter 8
  • Gladwell: “The Moral Hazard Myth”

25-SEP CONSUMERISM (A)
  • W/R, Chapter 7
  • Twitchell – "Two Cheers for Materialism"

30-SEP THE MARKET: FINANCE (B)
  • Wright and Rogers: Finance

2-OCT HIGH ROAD CAPITALISM (C/E)
  • W/R, Chapter 9
  • “High Road or Low Road: Job Quality in the New Green Economy” (read pages: 5-8, 11-19)

7-OCT MIDTERM #1

PART II. INEQUALITY

9-OCT THINKING ABOUT FAIRNESS AND CLASS INEQUALITY
  • W/R, Chapter 11 (D)
  • W/R, Chapter 10 (E)

14-OCT NO CLASS MEETING

16-OCT PERSISTENT POVERTY (A)
  • W/R, Chapter 12
  • Ehrenreich: excerpt from “Nickel and Dimed”
  • Watch: excerpt from “The American Ruling Class”
  • Lareau: Chapters 1, 2, and 12 from “Unequal Childhoods”

21-OCT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: WHAT CAN BE DONE? (B)
  • W/R, Chapter 13
  • “Guaranteed Income’s Moment in the Sun”

23-OCT RACIAL INEQUALITY (C)
• W/R, Chapter 14

28-Oct **Racial Inequality, continued (D)**
• Levine – “Testimony of Harry Levine Regarding New York State Senate Bill 5187”
• Western and Petit – “Beyond Crime and Punishment” Prisons and Inequality”
• Goffman – “On The Run”
• NYT: “Recording Points to Race Factor in Stops”
• *Optional*: Mason – “Jay-Z's 99 Problems, Verse 2: A Close Reading with Fourth Amendment Guidance for Cops and Perps”

30-Oct **Gender Inequality (E)**
• W/R, Chapter 15
• Faludi: “Betrayal of the American Man”

4-Nov **Gender Inequality, continued (A)**
• Jacobs: “Detours on the Road to Equality”
• Messner, “Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender”

6-Nov **Midterm #2**

**Part III. Democracy**

11-Nov **Capitalist Democracy: How It Works (B)**
• W/R, Chapter 16
• Putnam – “Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital”

13-Nov **Voting, Parties, Electoral Rules, Campaign Finance (C)**
• W/R, Chapter 17

18-Nov **Democracy and Taxation (D)**
• W/R, Chapter 18

20-Nov **Democracy and Corporate Media (E)**
• W/R, Chapter 19
• Watch: “Jon Stewart Interviews Jim Cramer” (3 parts)

25-Nov **Militarism & Empire (A)**
• W/R, Chapter 20
• Watch: “Eisenhower’s Farewell Address”

27-Nov **Thanksgiving**

2-Dec **Unions and Democracy (B)**
• W/R, Chapter 21
4-DEC DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW (C) --- POLICY BRIEF DUE IN CLASS
  • W/R, Chapter 22

9-DEC THE BIG LESSONS FROM THE COURSE (D)
  • W/R, Chapter 23

11-DEC IN-CLASS FINAL