

SOCIOLOGY 125: FALL 2009

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

LECTURES: M 5:30-8:00 PM, 6210 SEWELL BUILDING

PROFESSOR JOEL ROGERS

jrogers@ssc.wisc.edu, 608-890-2543, 7122 Social Science
Office Hours: BA or T 2-4 PM

TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Celeste Benson, cbenson@ssc.wisc.edu
8120 Social Science/262-6277

Chandra Hinton, chinton@ssc.wisc.edu
8120 Social Science/262-6277

Cabell Gathman, cabell.soc.ta@gmail.com
8120 Social Science/262-6277

Charity Schmidt, cschmidt@ssc.wisc.edu
8120 Social Science/262-6277

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What kind of a society is this? What explains how it works? The questions are not obvious in meaning. We all know what it means to ask of an unknown animal, plant, or mineral deposit *what kind of a — is this?* It's much less clear what is meant by asking that of a society. It's not even obvious what we're asking the question of, since societies change. A leopard can't change its spots. But a society can become more or less efficient in its economic organization, more or less equal in its distribution of opportunity, more or less democratic. Equally, in explaining how this society works, the elements that need explanation – the rules governing the behavior of individuals within it – can be changed by those individuals. People are different from plants, animals, and rocks. They have language, and the ability to imagine a future.

This course provides an extended answer to these questions for the United States. We want to know what kind of country this is, what makes it tick, and how its future might be better. We organize this inquiry around three key values that most Americans believe this society should realize.

- *Efficiency* – the idea that the economy allocates scarce resources in ways that reflect social values, are driven by free consumer choice, and use those resources wisely
- *Fairness* – the idea that we live in a land of equal opportunity and justice, without unjustified or unnecessary privileges and disadvantages
- *Democracy* – the idea that public decisions reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than those of powerful elites

For each value, our basic question is: *To what degree does contemporary American society realize this value, what explains that level of performance, and how might it be improved?* Throughout, we'll also be asking: *How do social scientists go about answering such questions?*

REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

Attendance: Students are expected to attend every lecture and discussion section.

Sociology 125: Contemporary American Society, 2

Readings: Students are expected to do every reading in advance of the corresponding lecture and discussion section. All readings are contained in a photocopied reader, available for purchase at the Social Science Copy Center (6129 Sewell Social Science Building) and on reserve at the Helen C. White Library. Additional readings may be assigned at the discretion of the instructor. These will be emailed to you or posted on the course website at <https://learnuw.wisc.edu>.

Exams: There will be three exams in this course, two midterms and a final. The first and second midterms will respectively cover only the first and second thirds of the course. The final exam will focus on the last third but include questions on other parts. All exams will be multiple-choice. They are not designed to test your creativity but your mastery of the lectures and readings. The exam schedule is:

First Midterm	Monday, October 19 (5:30-6:45 PM)
Second Midterm	Monday, November 16 (5:30-6:45 PM)
Final Exam	Thursday, December 17 (10:05 AM-12:05 PM)

Relation of lectures, readings, and sections: Lectures will often range beyond the readings assigned in preparation for them. Discussion sections will be used to discuss the readings in more detail than possible in lecture and to answer new questions brought up there, or by your section leader.

Grading: Your grade will be determined by your performance on exams and in section. The two midterms each count for 20 percent of your grade. The final exam and section each count for 30 percent. Each component of your grade will be assigned a numeric score. Your final grade will be the sum of such components, weighted by their importance.

Good manners: This is a large class. Please behave in a way that shows respect for your colleagues and the instructor and is minimally distracting to both. Please turn off cell phones before coming to class. Please be seated before the class begins. If you are late, please come in quietly and sit in the back. Please don't play computer games or watch video during class. Please don't bring food to class, or talk to colleagues during it. There will be a short break of about 10 minutes around the midpoint of each lecture. Please observe its limits.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES & READINGS

Introduction

L1: 9/14 — Introduction & “What kind of a country is this?”

- [1] Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works* (New York: WW Norton, 2010, *forthcoming*) [hereinafter AS], Chs. 1-2.

Efficiency

L2: 9/21 — Markets in theory and practice

- [2] AS, Chs. 3-4
[3] Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1999), pp. 262-265

L3: 9/28 — Environment & Transportation

- [4] AS, Chs. 5-6
[5] Peter Montague, “Oceans without Fish,” *Rachel’s Environment & Health Weekly* #587, February 26, 1998
[6] Bradford Snell, “American Ground Transport”, in Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie, *Crisis in American Institutions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1994), pp. 276-289

L4: 10/05 — Consumerism & Health care

- [7] AS, Chs. 7-8
- [8] Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Universal Health Care: what the United States can Learn from the Canadian Experience," in Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie (eds.), *Crisis in American Institutions* (12th edition, Pearson Publishers 2004), pp. 293-303
- [9] Malcolm Gladwell, "The Moral Hazard Myth," *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2005

L5: 10/12 — Taking the high road

- [10] AS, Ch. 9
- [11] Joel Rogers, "Build the High Road Here," *The Nation* (April 17, 2006)
- [12] Annette Bernhardt, Laura Dresser, and Joel Rogers, "Taking the High Road in Milwaukee," in David Reynolds (ed.), *Partnering for change: unions and community groups build coalitions for economic justice* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 231-247
- [13] Thomas A. Kochan, "Taking the High Road," *Sloan Management Review* 47 (Summer 2006): 16, 18-19

Fairness

L6: 10/19 — Thinking about inequality and fairness

- [14] AS, Chs. 10-11

L7: 10/26 — Persistent poverty and increasing inequality

- [15] AS, Chs. 12-13
- [16] "Child Poverty in Rich Nations" (UNICEF), *Innocenti Report Card Issue No. 1*, June 2000, pp. 4-17
- [17] Robert Frank and Philip Cook, "Winner-Take-All Markets," in Frank & Cook, *The Winner-take-all-Society* (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 1-22

L8: 11/02 — Racial inequality

- [18] AS, Ch. 14
- [19] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Color of Suspicion", in Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie (eds.), *Crisis in American Institutions* (12th edition, Pearson Publishers 2004), pp. 141-156
- [20] Jenni Gainsborough and Marc Mauer, *Diminishing Returns: Crime and Incarceration in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2000)
- [21] Kristen Lavelle and Joe Feagin, "Hurricane Katrina: The Race and Class Debate," *Monthly Review* 58 (July-August 2006)
- [22] Daisy Hernandez, "Becoming a Black Man," *ColorLines* 42 (January-February 2008)

L9: 11/09 — Gender inequality

- [23] AS, Ch. 15
- [24] Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1-19, 181-89, 196-201, 250-268
- [25] Sara McLanahan, "Diverging Destinies: How Children Are Faring under the Second Demographic Transition," *Demography* 41 (November 2004): 607-627

Democracy

L10: 11/16 — Capitalist democracy

- [26] AS, Ch. 16
- [27] "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," report of the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, American Political Science Association, 2004

L11: 11/23 — Taxation

- [28] AS, Ch. 18

L12: 11/30 — Voting, parties, elections, and media

[29] AS, Chs. 17, 19

[30] Robert Dahl, Ch. 5, “How Well Does the Constitutional System Perform?” in Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

[31] Robert W. McChesney & John Nichols, *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), Introduction and Ch.1, “The Problem With the US Media”

L13: 12/7 — Militarism & Unions

[32] AS, Chs. 20-22

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

[34] Richard B. Freeman & Joel Rogers, *What Workers Want* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), Ch. 1, “Ask the People Who Live There” and Ch. 7, “If Workers Could Choose”

L14: 12/14 — Alternative futures & Big ideas from the course

[35] AS, Ch. 23

* * * * *

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. — Abraham Lincoln

Enthusiastic partisans of the idea of progress are in danger of failing to recognize ... the immense riches accumulated by the human race on either side of the narrow furrow on which they keep their eyes fixed; by underrating the achievements of the past, they devalue all those which still remain to be accomplished. If men have always been concerned with only one task – how to create a society fit to live in – the forces which inspired our distant ancestors are also present in us. Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered. What was done, but turned out wrong, can be done again. The “Golden Age,” which blind superstition had placed behind (or ahead of) us, is in us. — Claude Lévi-Strauss

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.... I wouldn't give a nickel for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I'd give my whole life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity. — Albert Einstein