Sociology 125

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

Fall Semester, 2000

Lectures Tuesday & Thursday, 11:00-12:15
Chadbourne Hall

Professor: Erik Olin Wright
8112D Social Science, tel. 262-2921
Office Hours: Tuesday, 2:00 - 3:00, or by appointment

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 answer the parallel question about society. This course provides an extended answer to this question. It also explores the implications of the answer for understanding the source, and possible solution, of some of the pressing social problems in the United States facing the U.S. today, as well as the obstacles to those solutions.

Thematicaly, we will mainly focus on three broad clusters of issues about the United States: (1) in a context of “hyper-capitalism,” America’s exceptionally heavy reliance on the market as a source of regulating social life; (2) in this “land of opportunity,” the endurance (and on some dimensions, growth) of social and economic inequality; (3) in this oldest and most stable of the world’s democracies, the current strength of our democratic institutions, including citizen organization and involvement in governance.

In each of these areas, there are common claims made – that the market is the best way to solve most important problems, that inequality is largely a thing of the past, that our democracy is still the most vital in the world – that we wish to critically examine. And, where we identify problems, we wish to point toward feasible alternatives that could help solve them.
Requirements and Grading

1. **Exams.** There will be two mid-term exams and a final examination. The final exam will focus primarily on the material after the second mid-term, but there will also be some questions on the most important ideas from the earlier parts of the course. The purpose of the exams is mainly to see if you have done the reading and absorbed the main ideas of the lectures rather than to test your creativity. The dates for the exams are:

   - Exam #1: Tuesday, October 10
   - Exam #2: Tuesday, November 14
   - Final Exam: date to be announced

   The official date for the final exam is 2:45 p.m. on Friday, December 22. Since the class is small, I hope that we can find an earlier date on which we can schedule the final. We will discuss this early in the semester.

2. **Short worldwide web assignments.** In sessions 8 & 24 there are short assignments to look up something on the web and write a short summary. The dates for handing in these assignments are September 28 and November 30 respectively.

3. **The Nation.** I have ordered 12-week subscriptions for everyone in the class for one of the oldest magazines in America that presents provocative and interesting articles on current affairs and social issues, *The Nation*. Students are required to write short commentaries on articles of their choosing in this magazine **five** times during the semester. These commentaries should summarize the main idea of the article and then make some comment on what it says. (A comment needs to be more than: “This was a great article” or “The dumbest piece I ever read”. You need to say something substantive about some idea in the article.) The commentaries should be in the vicinity of 200-400 words long.

   I will also hold discussions outside of class on selected articles from these issues – either articles which students in the class are eager to discuss or articles that I think would add to the course. Participation in these discussions is strictly voluntary.

4. **Term paper.** There will be a 10-15 page term paper due at the end of the semester. The basic idea of the term paper is for you to pick some theme about American society you care about and write a paper in which you compare the problem under consideration **now** and **when your parents were more or less you present age**. Roughly this will mean comparing things now with the late 1960s to early 1970s. You can write on any topic, but some examples would include:
   - the American family
   - employment opportunities for women
   - racial inequality
   - prisons
   - the role of television in society
   - sexual identity
   - student activism
   - sports

As part of the assignment you will need to interview someone of your parents’ generation about what it was like in the earlier period (this can be a parent if you like) and look at some contemporary material in newspapers or magazines from the period. Sometime in the first few weeks of the semester you will get detailed instructions about the steps you should follow in working on this paper. Deadlines for preparation of the paper are:

   - Choosing a topic: September 26
   - Thematic sketch of ideas: October 31
   - Rough draft of paper: November 28
   - Final draft of paper: December 14
3. **Grades.** The weights for the final grades will be roughly as follows

- attendance/diligence: 5%
- Exam #1: 15%
- Exam #2: 15%
- Exam #3: 20%
- *Nation* commentaries: 10%
- web assignments: 5%
- term paper: meeting deadlines: 5%
- term paper: final draft: 25%

**Readings**

The books for the course are available at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 West Gilman. There is also a photocopied reading packet available at the Social Science Copy Center. Copies of the readings will be on reserve at H.C. White Library. Required Books for the course:


- *Do Americans Shop too Much?* by Juliet Schor (Beacon Press 2000)


- *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* by Robert W. McChesney (Seven Stories Press, 1997)
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<td>Tuesday 9/5 Introduction</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Thursday 9/7 What Kind of a Country is this?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Tuesday 9/12 The logic of the Market: how it is supposed to work</td>
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<td>Thursday 9/14 The operation of the market</td>
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<td>Tuesday 9/19 Analytical tools: externalities, collective action, power</td>
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<td>Thursday 9/21 The environment</td>
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<td>Tuesday 9/26 Transportation: film: “Taken for a Ride”</td>
<td>Paper: Topic statement</td>
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<td>Tuesday 10/3 Consumerism</td>
<td>Joel Rogers, guest lecture</td>
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<td>Thursday 10/5 Privatization &amp; commercialization: the case of prisons</td>
<td>Joel Rogers, guest lecture</td>
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<td>Tuesday 10/24 Economic Inequality: persistent poverty</td>
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<td>Thursday 10/26 Economic Inequality: increasing inequality</td>
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<td>Tuesday 10/31 Economic Inequality: alternatives</td>
<td>Paper: thematic sketch of ideas</td>
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<td>Thursday 11/2 Racial Inequality: Film: “Eyes on the Prize”</td>
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<td>Tuesday 11/7 Racial Inequality, continued</td>
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<td>Thursday 11/9 Gender inequality</td>
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<td>Tuesday 11/14 Exam #2</td>
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<td>Thursday 11/16 Capitalist Democracy &amp; the “Exceptional” US Case</td>
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<td>Tuesday 11/21 Capitalist Democracy, continued</td>
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<td>Paper: First Draft</td>
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<td>Tuesday 12/5 Rebuilding Cities – Film: “Holding Ground: the revival of Dudley Street”</td>
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<td>Thursday 12/7 Rebuilding Cities, continued</td>
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<td>Thursday 12/14 Possible futures</td>
<td>Paper: final draft</td>
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**READING ASSIGNMENTS**

Numbered items in square brackets [ ] appear in the photocopied course reader

1. **Introduction to the Course**

2. **What kind of Country is this?**

   [1] Comparative Data on the US and Other countries. (prepared by Erik Wright and Joel Rogers)

   *Economic Apartheid in America*, by Collins and Yeskel, chapter 1, “The Dangerous Consequences of Growing Inequality”, pp. 13-39

3 & 4. **The Logic of the Market**


5. **Tools for Analysis: collective action, externalities, power**

   [2] “Conceptual Clarifications” (prepared by Joel Rogers and Erik Wright)

6. **The environment**

   Nancy Beiles, “What Monsanto Knew”, *The Nation*, May 29, 2000. You can find this piece on *The Nation* website at: http://www.thenation.com/2000/000529.shtml . When you get to this website, scroll down until you find the Beiles article listed, then click on it and you will get the article.

7 & 8. **Transportation**


   Web assignment #1: Explore the following two websites — http://www.rachel.org and http://www.corporatepredators.org -- for examples of how the exercise of corporate power continues to undermine the environment, public transportation, or other public goods. Summarize and give your opinion of/reaction to at least three examples, including at least one that involved clearly illegal corporate behavior, in no more than 3 pages. Due in class Thursday, September 28.

9. **Consumerism**

   *Do Americans Shop too Much?* by Juliet Schor pp. 1-52, 69-74

10. **Privatization and Deregulation: the case of prisons**

11. EXAM #1

12 & 13. Healthcare


14. Training and Education


15. Economic Inequality: persistent poverty and increasing inequality


*Economic Apartheid in America*, by Collins and Yeskel, chapter 2, “The Picture: Growing Economic Insecurity and Inequality”, pp. 39-67

16. Economic Inequality: explaining increasing inequality


17. Economic Inequality: Thinking about alternatives


18 & 19. Racial inequality in America


20. Gender Inequality: changes and prospects


21. EXAM #2
22 & 23. Capitalist Democracy and the “Exceptional” U.S. Case


24. Campaign Finance


Web Assignment #2: Explore the website http://www.publiccampaing.org for examples of corporations influencing political campaigns or policy through the use of money. Summarize and give your opinion of/reaction to at least three examples, in no more than 3 pages. Due in class Thursday, November 30.

25. Democracy and Corporate control of the Media

*Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* by Robert W. McChesney


26 & 27. Rebuilding Cities


28. Worker Representation


29. Possible Futures

*Economic Apartheid in America*, by Collins and Yeskel, “Actions to Close the Economic Divide”, pp. 141-214
GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

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 battlefield 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 can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far about 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 resolved 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, 19 November 1863