To: Graduate Students in Sociology  
Re: Possible seminars to be taught by Erik Wright for the fall of 2004

I am in the process of deciding what seminars to offer for the fall of 2004 and 2005. I thought it would be useful for me to know what topics students would be especially interested in. The seminar next fall will meet Thursdays 3:30-6:00. Please let me know which – if any – of the following seminars you would be potentially interested in. It would also be helpful to me to know if you feel you are likely to actually enroll in it if it is offered (but this entails NO obligation on your part). I would like to have responses to this by December 20 if possible.

1. Philosophy of (Social) Science (last taught 1998), possibly to be co-taught with Dan Hausman (Philosophy)

This seminar explores a range of central meta-theoretical issues in social sciences, including:

- general stances in philosophy of science: what is “science”? what is “knowledge”? is there a fundamental difference between social and natural sciences?
- alternative meanings of “explanation”
- anomalies and puzzles
- the problem of causal primacy in multi-causal systems
- methodological individualism
- reasons as explanations
- functional explanation
- the status of “concepts” in social theory
- scientific realism as a stance in social science
- the relationship between mathematical models and explanation in social research.

Each student in the course will be part of a 2-3 person research team whose task will be to prepare a philosophy of science interview of a prominent social scientist (I will recruit a list of subjects) at UW. These interviews will be videotaped and, during the last 3-4 weeks of the class, we will show the videotapes in class and discuss them.

2. Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis (last taught 2001)

This seminar will explore the full range of theoretical frameworks within which “class” figures as a relevant concept. At the core of the seminar will be my forthcoming edited book Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis, but we will also read from a range of classic texts and more empirical case studies. One of the central issues addressed throughout the course will be the problem of “concept formation” and the relationship between conceptual debates and theoretical debates within sociology. The perspectives covered in the class will include:

- Marx and the neo-Marxist tradition
- Weber and contemporary Weberians
- Bourdieu
- neo-Durkheimian class analysis
- historical comparative class analysis
- the death of class debate
3. Theories of the State (last taught in 2002)

At the core of this seminar is a moral and political concern: to what extent is it possible to achieve a more egalitarian, humane and democratic society within a capitalist society? It is a fundamental tenet of Marxist theories of the state that the state in capitalist society is deeply shaped and constrained by the class relations of capitalism, but this leaves open the extent to which progressive change can be achieved within those constraints. At one extreme is classical Leninism, which sees the capitalist state as so profoundly imbued with a capitalist character that even where nominally democratic institutions exist, there is little prospect for progressive change. The state is fundamentally a “superstructure”: its form and structures functionally reproduce the basic class relations of capitalism. As a result, to use Lenin's expression, the state must be smashed; serious reforms in an egalitarian direction will inevitably fail or be reversed. At the other extreme is classical social democracy which viewed state apparatuses as basically class neutral and regarded class structure as simply one among a variety of obstacles to be overcome. Popular mobilization, particularly when organized through a coordination of the labor movement and socialist parties, had the potential to gradually reform capitalism in a radically egalitarian direction through social democratic state policies. Between these extremes are a variety of theoretical and political positions which see the constraints on radical change imposed by the capitalist state as variable, both in terms of the kinds of changes they permit and the extent to which struggles can transform the constraints themselves. The “contradictory functionality” of the state creates a complex, variable political space within which egalitarian, democratic, and even emancipatory politics can be pursued.

The central task of this seminar, then, is to explore a range of theoretical and empirical issues that bear on the problem of understanding such possibilities for radical, egalitarian politics in capitalist societies. Above all we will focus on the problem of the complex interconnections between class, the economy, and the state. To develop the theoretical tools to approach these issues we will have to grapple with some fairly abstract conceptual questions: what does it mean to say that the state has a “class character”? What is the difference between an external constraint on state actions imposed by class relations and an internal institutionalization of class constraints within the state itself? What does it mean to describe the state as having “autonomy” -- relative, potential, limited or absolute? The seminar, however, will not exclusively grapple with these issues at a purely abstract conceptual level. Rather, in most of the sessions we will focus on specific historical/empirical problems through which we will refine the conceptual tools and build our theoretical understanding. Tentatively, the seminar will be organized around five blocks of topics:

- Class Constraints on and in the State
- The Formation of the Early Modern State
- The State in Developing Capitalist Economies
- The State in the Globalizing Capitalist Economy
- Capitalist Democracy and its Reconstruction.

4. A Moral Audit of American Institutions (new seminar)

This is a course I have not taught before. It grows out of a long-term project on which I have been working erratically for several years. The core framework for this seminar is captured in the typology on the following page. The seminar will systematically explore and refine this typology in order to give greater precision to a sociology that is normatively as well as theoretically and empirically grounded. My thought would be that individual students in the seminar (or groups of students) would work on particular columns in this typology – or additional columns which they propose.
# A Typology for a Moral Audit of American Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freedom/liberté</th>
<th>Equality</th>
<th>Community/fraternité</th>
<th>&quot;The Good Life&quot;</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>dominant, system-affirming form of the value</strong></td>
<td>negative freedom</td>
<td>equality of opportunity</td>
<td>common fate; shared identity</td>
<td>material affluence</td>
<td>democratic accountability of leaders: representative democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>subordinate, system-challenging form of the value</strong></td>
<td>positive freedom</td>
<td>equality of basic well-being</td>
<td>mutual caring; sustained reciprocities; deep mutual respect</td>
<td>quality of life: human flourishing, self-actualization</td>
<td>empowered participation of ordinary people</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>central institutions and practices for dominant value</strong></td>
<td>markets private property civil liberties</td>
<td>education; anti-discrimination; affirmative action</td>
<td>citizenship, nationalism</td>
<td>&quot;free&quot; markets; consumption</td>
<td>electoral democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>central institutions and practices for subordinate value</strong></td>
<td>capacity enhancing public goods: libraries; public access cable</td>
<td>government redistribution, social security, anti-poverty programs</td>
<td>voluntary association; intentional community</td>
<td>Creative leisure</td>
<td>activism, social movements, direct democracy, coops</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>empirical examples of failure to realize dominant value</strong></td>
<td>government interference with reproductive rights; censorship; negative economic externalities</td>
<td>discrimination by gender, race; inequality in educational quality</td>
<td>anomie, crime</td>
<td>persistent poverty</td>
<td>power elite; campaign financing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>empirical examples of problems generated by excessive weight of dominant value</strong></td>
<td>environmental degradation; market failures; media concentration</td>
<td>blame the victim; stigmatization</td>
<td>exclusionary identities (racism, xenophobia, etc.)</td>
<td>hyper-consumerism; status consumption</td>
<td>depoliticization, apathy, abstention</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Real Utopian designs for realization of subordinate value</strong></td>
<td>market socialism; asset-egalitarian capitalism</td>
<td>universal basic income</td>
<td>institutions for radical &quot;recognition&quot;</td>
<td>voluntary simplicity; life course flexibility; sabbatical accounts</td>
<td>empowered participatory democracy</td>
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