SOCIOLOGY 125

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
SOCIETY

FALL 2004

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

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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:

- **Democracy** – the idea that our public decisions reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than those of powerful elites

- **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.

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

These books are available at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman Street:


There is also a photocopied reading packet that is part of the reading for the course. This is available at the Social Science Copy Center. 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 11 films (mostly documentaries) 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. We will have two showings a week – one on Monday evenings at 7:30 and a second on Tuesday evenings at 7:30. 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, although because there are 400 students in the class it will be difficult for many of you to view the films in the Media Center if you skip the evening showings. Erik Wright will try to come to the Monday night showings whenever possible and will stay to discuss the film with any interested students.

Exams: There will two exams in this course: a mid-term and a final. The mid-term will be on material covered until that time. The final will focus heavily on material covered since the 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: Monday, October 18
- Final: Monday, December 20, 10:05 a.m.

Short term paper: A short term paper 1500-2000 words long (i.e. about 6-8 double-spaced pages). I refer to this as a “Then & Now paper”. 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 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 do the following:

1. Interview someone of your parents' generation about what it was like in the earlier period (this can be a parent if you like).

2. Get information from some contemporary material in newspapers or magazines from the earlier period and from the current period. The best thing, if possible, would be to use the same source (e.g., Time magazine, the New York Times, etc.).

3. Use at least two academic sources for information for writing your paper. This can be a book or article.

In the second week of the semester you will get detailed instructions about the steps you should follow in working on this paper from your TA. Deadlines for preparation of the paper are:

- a. choosing a topic September 26
- b. thematic sketch of ideas October 31
- c. final draft of paper December 6

Grading: Your grade will be determined by performance on the exams, the writing assignment and in section. The midterm exam will count for 25 percent of your grade; the final for 35 percent; the term paper 30 percent and your performance in section for 10 percent. Honors credit is available for this course. Honors students will be expected to write a more substantial paper.
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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Film Series</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9/8 Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9/13 What kind of a country is this?</td>
<td>The Corporation</td>
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<td><strong>Part I. Democracy</strong></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9/15 Capitalist Democracy: how it works</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9/20 Capitalist Democracy: how it works</td>
<td>Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9/21 Taxation &amp; the attack on the affirmative state</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9/27 Voting, parties, electoral rules, Campaign finance</td>
<td>This is what Democracy Looks like</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>9/29 Taxation &amp; the attack on the affirmative state</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>10/4 Militarism &amp; Empire</td>
<td>Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10/6 Unions and Democracy</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>10/11 Democracy from below</td>
<td>No film</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10/13 MIDTERM</td>
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<td><strong>Part II. Efficiency</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>10/18 The market: how it is supposed to work</td>
<td>Bread and Roses</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10/20 The market: how it actually works</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>10/25 The market: how it actually works</td>
<td>Roger and Me</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10/27 The environment</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>11/1 Transportation</td>
<td>Taken for a Ride</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>11/3 Consumerism</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>11/8 Health Care</td>
<td>Merchants of cool – corporate media</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>11/10 Building the “high road”</td>
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<td><strong>Part III. Fairness</strong></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>11/15 Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness</td>
<td>Our Children at Risk</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>11/17 Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>11/22 Economic Inequality: persistent poverty</td>
<td>Dark Days</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>11/24 Economic Inequality: increasing inequality</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>11/29 Economic Inequality: alternatives</td>
<td>Eyes on the Prize (episode about freedom riders)</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>12/1 Racial Inequality</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>12/6 Racial Inequality, continued</td>
<td>Holding Ground: Rebirth of Dudley St.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>12/8 Gender inequality</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>12/13 Gender inequality</td>
<td>No film</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>12/15 Imagining Alternative Futures</td>
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Reading Assignments

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

1. Wednesday 9/8       Introduction to the Course
no reading assignment

2. Monday 9/13         What kind of a country is this?

Part I. Democracy

3. Wednesday 9/15      Capitalist Democracy: how it works
4. Monday 9/20         Capitalist Democracy: how it works, continued


5. Wednesday 9/21      Capitalist Democracy and Taxation


6. **Monday 9/27**  
**Elections: voting, parties, campaign finance**


7. **Wednesday 9/29**  
**Democracy and Corporate Media**


8. **Monday 10/4**  
**Militarism & Empire**


9. **Wednesday 10/6**  
**Unions and Democracy**

10. **Monday 10/11**  Democracy from below


**Wednesday 10/13**  *****Mid Term Examination*****

**Part II. Efficiency**

11. **Monday 10/18**  The market: how it is supposed to work


12. **Wednesday 10/20**  The market: How it actually works

13. **Monday 10/25**  The market: How it actually works, continued


14. **Wednesday 10/27**  The environment


15. **Monday 11/1**  Transportation

16. Wednesday 11/3  Consumerism
[20]  *Do Americans Shop too Much?* By Juliet Schor pp. 1-52

17. Monday 11/8  Health Care

18. Wednesday 11/19  Building “high road” capitalism
[22]  Daniel Luria and Joel Rogers, “Metro Futures” pp. 3-39

Part III. Fairness

19. Monday 11/15  Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness
20. Wednesday 11/17  Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness, continued

[24]  Erik Olin Wright, “The Class Analysis of Poverty,” chapter 2 in Erik Olin Wright *Interrogating Inequality* (Verso, 1994). (Note: I have substituted some pages from another of my books in the middle of this chapter because it explains certain issues a little better.)

21. Monday 11/22  Economic Inequality: persistent poverty


22. Wednesday 11/24  Economic Inequality: increasing inequality


23. **Monday 11/29**  
**Economic Inequality: alternatives**


24. **Wednesday 12/1**  
25. **Monday 12/6**  
**Racial Inequality**

**Racial Inequality, continued**


26. Wednesday 12/8   Gender inequality
27. Monday 12/14   Gender inequality


**FINAL SESSION**

28. Wednesday 12/16   Imagining Alternative Futures
