

# **SOCIOLOGY 125: FALL 2011**

## **CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY**

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

### **PROFESSOR JOEL ROGERS**

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Office Hours: T 11AM–1PM or by appointment

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

What kind of society do we live in? What does it even mean to talk about a “kind” of society? We all know what it means to ask of a strange animal “what kind of animal/mineral is this?” But it’s less clear what it means to ask that question of a society. This is partly because societies involve people, with minds and passions, whose behavior is hard to predict. And it’s partly because societies change. A leopard can’t change its spots. But societies can and often do become, for example, more or less productive in their economic organization, more or less equal in their distribution of opportunity to members, or more or less democratic.

This course provides an extended answer to the question of *What kind of a society is the United States?* It also explores the implications of that answer for understanding and making progress on solving some of the problems that confront America today. Our discussion revolves around five key values that most Americans believe this society should realize:

1. *Freedom*: the idea that members of the society should be able, to the greatest degree possible, to live their lives as they wish;
2. *Prosperity*: the idea that the society’s economy should generate the highest possible standard of living;
3. *Efficiency*: the idea that the economy should be maximally precise in allocating product to needs and wants, and maximally productive and conserving in its use of resources;
4. *Fairness*: the idea that members of the society should enjoy equal protection of the law and equal opportunity to make something of their lives;
5. *Democracy*: the idea that public decisions should reflect the collective will of equal citizens, not powerful and privileged 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?*

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

**Readings** — Apart from the Gettysburg Address (see below), there is only one required reading for this course: *American Society: How it Really Works (AS)*. This book, written by Erik Olin Wright and me, is based on ideas and themes we developed in this course over several years of teaching it. (We used to assign collections of readings but were never entirely satisfied with their coverage of the issues we thought important, so finally decided to write this book instead.) *AS* is available for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, an independent community bookstore located at 426 W. Gilman Street (between State and University). Wright and I have arranged with Rainbow to reduce the cost of new copies of *AS* purchased there by what we'd ordinarily get (pre-tax!) in royalties. We don't have this arrangement with any other bookstore.

**Film series** — A film series supplements the reading as core material for the course. Entries in this series average about 1.5 hrs. There will be a public showing of each entry on the Tuesday of the week it is assigned, starting at 7:15 PM in 6210 Sewell. The films are also available for individual viewing at H.C. White Library Reserves. Many are also available on Netflix or can be viewed on line there or for free. Students are required keep a film journal in which, after viewing each film, they write a short ( $\approx$  300 words) commentary on how it relates to topics and material considered in the course. Collected entries in this journal should be delivered to their TA on this schedule:

Films 1-5: in discussion sections the week of 10/24

Films 6-9: in discussion sections the week of 11/21

Films 10-14: at the final examination on 12/21

**Section** — Section discussions are also a core course component. For each section, students are expected to come prepared to speak on (a) something from the readings or lectures that they don't fully understand and (b) something from the readings or lectures that they disagree with and/or about which they would like to see more discussion. Sections begin meeting Tuesday September 13.

**Requirements** — Students are expected to attend and be prepared for every lecture and discussion section and to view and report on all films in the film series. (If you have a problem of any kind doing any of these things, let your TA know *in advance* of their expected performance.)

**Exams** — There will three exams in the course: two mid-terms and a final. The midterms will be limited to testing on the major course section they immediately follow. The final will focus heavily on material covered since the second mid-term but also include questions on important ideas explored earlier in the course. These exams will be multiple-choice. They are not designed to test for creativity, only understanding of the material covered. The dates and times for the exams are:

Midterm #1	Monday, October 17 (first half of class period)
Midterm #2	Monday, November 14 (first half of class period)
Final	Wednesday, December 21 (precise time and location TBD)

**Grading** — Grades for the course will be based on performance on the exams, contribution to

section, and a completed film journal. The midterm exams and section contribution will each count for 20 percent of final grades; the final for 30 percent; the film journal for 10 percent. No honors credit is available for this course.

**Manners** — This is a large class. In lecture, 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 unavoidably 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, AND FILMS

Below, from left to right, are the numbers of lectures, their date, the AS chapters assigned to them, and that week's entry in the film series.

<b>Introduction to course</b>				
1	9/12	1-2	What kind of a society is this?	<i>Food, Inc.</i>
<b>Part 1: Market capitalism</b>				
2	9/19	3-4	The market	<i>The Corporation (chs. 1-13, 18-23)</i>
3	9/26	5	Environment	<i>An Inconvenient Truth</i>
4	10/3	6-7	Transportation & consumerism	<i>Taken for a Ride &amp; Shop 'til you drop</i>
5	10/10	8-9	Health care & the high road	<i>Sick around the world</i>
	10/17		Midterm #1	
<b>Part 2: Inequality</b>				
6	10/17	10	Equality, inequality, and fairness	<i>The American Dream</i>
7	10/24	11-13	Class & persistent poverty	<i>Freedom on my Mind</i>
8	10/31	14	Racial inequality	<i>Tulia, Texas</i>
9	11/7	15	Gender inequality	<i>Killing us Softly</i>
	11/14		Midterm #2	
<b>Part 3: Democracy</b>				
10	11/14	16	Capitalist democracy	<i>The Golden Rule</i>
11	11/21	17	Voting and elections	<i>Casino Jack and the U.S. of Money</i>
12	11/28	18-19	Taxation & media	<i>Manufacturing Consent</i>
13	12/5	20-21	Militarism	<i>Why we Fight</i>
14	12/12	22-23	Democracy from below	<i>Holding Ground</i>
	12/21		Final Exam	

### 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 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 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 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, November 19, 1863

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Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction.... 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

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