

**SOCIOLOGY 125**

**AMERICAN SOCIETY:  
how it really works**

**Professor Erik Olin Wright**

**FALL 2014**

**Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursday, 2:30-3:45**

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**Office Hours:**

**Tuesdays 1:00-2:00 and Thursdays 4:00-5:00**

## 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 five key values that most Americans believe our society should realize:

1. *Freedom*: the idea, commonly thought to be the most essential to the “American creed,” that people should be able to live their lives, to the greatest degree possible, as they wish. This means people should be free from coercive restrictions imposed by others and, as much as possible, have the capacity to put their life plans into effect.
2. *Prosperity*: the idea that an economy should generate a high standard of living for most people, not just a small privileged elite.
3. *Economic efficiency*: the idea that the economy should generate rational outcomes, effectively balancing costs and benefits in the way resources are used.
4. *Fairness*: the idea that people should be treated justly and that they should have equal opportunity to make something of their lives without unfair privileges and unfair disadvantages.
5. *Democracy*: the idea that our public decisions should reflect the collective will of equal citizens, not of powerful and privileged elites.

A central theme throughout the course will be: *To what degree does contemporary American society realize these values, and how might it do a better job?*

## READINGS, REQUIREMENTS, AND GRADING

Students are expected to show up for every class, do the readings, and participate actively in discussions in the weekly discussion sections. If you have a problem of *any* kind with attendance, let your TA know what’s up.

### *Readings*

There is one required book for the course: *American Society: how it really works*, by Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (W.W. Norton, 2010). Joel Rogers and I wrote this book on the basis of the themes and ideas we have developed in this course over the past twenty years. In the past we were never very happy with the readings we used in the course – they never seemed to exactly cover the material in the lectures – so we decided to write a book specifically designed for this course. Each chapter in the book corresponds to one or two lectures in the course. There are no

other assigned readings, so you should have plenty of time to read these chapters very carefully. Recently we have prepared a revised edition of the book which updates all of the tables and graphs and adds some new material, particularly a new chapter on Finance. This new edition, however, is not yet in print, so we will provide a photocopied version of these new materials to students in the class.

The book is available at the **Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative**, 426 W Gilman St (near State Street). This is an independent, community-oriented bookstore, not part of any larger chain or corporation. Buying books from this store is a way of supporting an important community resource.

I very strongly urge students to read the chapter assigned for a given lecture **BEFORE** the lecture and then reread the chapter after the lecture. In the lectures I will go over the core ideas in each chapter, but you will be in a better position to understand the themes and issues if you have read the chapter first.

### *Discussion Sections*

Many of the topics in this class will be very challenging and the ideas controversial, so it is important that students have an opportunity to discuss the issues. While there will be some opportunity for discussion during the twice-weekly lectures, the size of the class makes it impossible for there to be intensive participation. This is why the course is organized with weekly discussion sections lead by graduate teaching assistants. All students in the class are required to participate in a weekly discussion section. The Teaching Assistants that lead these sections are excellent and will be available to help you with any problems you have in the class.

### *Exams*

There will three exams in this course: two mid-terms and a final. The final will focus heavily on material covered since the second 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 questions. 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 #1	Thursday, October 9
Midterm #2	Tuesday, November 11
Final	Thursday, December 18, 10:05-12:05

### *Grading*

Grades for the course will be based on performance on the exams, and attendance and participation in discussion sections. The midterm exams will each count for 25 percent of your grade; the final for 30 percent; and participation in sections for 20 percent.

## LECTURE SCEDHULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125

		<b>Reading: Chapter from <i>American Society</i></b>	<b>TOPIC</b>
1	9/2	1	Prologue: Perspectives and Values
2	9/4	2	What kind of a country is this?
<b>Part I. CAPITALISM</b>			
3	9/9	3	The market: how it is supposed to work
4	9/11	4	The market: How it actually works
5	9/16	4	The market: How it actually works
6	9/18	5	The environment
7	9/23	6	Transportation
8	9/25	7	Consumerism
9	9/30	8	Health Care
10	10/2	<i>To be distributed</i>	Finance
11	10/7	9	High Road Capitalism
	10/9		<b>Midterm #1</b>
<b>Part II. INEQUALITY</b>			
12	10/14	10	Thinking about Fairness and Inequality
13	10/16	11	Class
14	10/21	12	Persistent poverty and Rising Inequality
15	10/23	13	Ending Poverty in America
16	10/28	14	Racial Inequality
17	10/30	14	Racial Inequality, continued
18	11/4	15	Gender inequality
19	11/6	15	Gender inequality
	11/11		<b>Midterm #2</b>
<b>Part III. DEMOCRACY</b>			
20	11/13	16	Democracy : how it works
21	11/18	17	Elections and voting
22	11/20	18	Taxation and the Attack on the Affirmative State
23	11/25	19	Corporate Control of the Media
	11/27		<b>THANKSGIVING</b>
24	12/2	20	Militarism and Empire
25	12/4	21	Labor Unions
26	12/9	22	Democracy from below
27	12/11	23	Conclusion: Possible Futures
12/18 10:05 a.m.			<b>Final Examination</b>