

**SOCIOLOGY 125**

**CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN  
SOCIETY**

**FALL 2010**

**Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursday, 11:00-12:15  
Bascom Hall 272**

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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 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 and discussion section, do the readings, 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.

### *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 three years ago 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.

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. Because I believe that I should not make any money off of books that I assign in class, I have made arrangements with Rainbow Bookstore for the price of the book to be reduced by the amount of the royalty we receive for each copy sold (\$4.50). This price is below the price you can get from discount on-line booksellers.

I very strongly urge students to read the chapter assigned for a given lecture **BEFORE** 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.

### *Documentary Film Series* (see pp. 5-8 below for descriptions of films)

An integral part of this course is a 13-part documentary film series. These films are quite diverse in both style and content. Some were made by well-funded producers, released commercially and shown in theaters around the country; others were made by independent filmmakers with very little financial backing and limited distribution. Some are quite academic in character, mainly involving experts explaining various themes. Others revolve around historical events, showing extensive footage of various real life happenings. And at least one of the films mixes serious interviews with fairly whimsical musical episodes. Most of the films are around 90 minutes long, but on a few occasions in the semester we will be showing two films and the length will be over two hours.

The films will be treated like readings: they are a required part of the course with an associated written assignment (see below) and there will be questions on the exams about them. Each week there will be two screenings of the films in room 6210 Sewell Social Sciences – one on Monday evening at 7:15 and a second on Tuesday evening at 7:15 (except for the first week of the semester after Labor Day during which the showings will be on Tuesday and Wednesday evening). The films will also be available at the H.C. White Reserves (first floor of the library when you enter the building) for individual viewing in the library. Many of the films are also available on Netflix and a few can be viewed on line.

### *Film Journal*

Students are required to keep a “film journal” in which they write a brief comment after viewing each film linking some aspects of the film with issues discussed in class and in the readings. These comments should be no more than 300 words long. The central point is to show that you watched the film and have given some thought to its connection to the themes and ideas of the course. These film journals will be handed in to the Teaching Assistants on the following schedule:

- Films 1-5: in discussion sections the week of October 11-15
- Films 6-9: in discussion sections the week of November 16-18
- Films 10-13: at the final examination

### *Exams*

There will be 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 7
Midterm #2	Tuesday, November 9
Final	Tuesday, December 21, 2:45-4:45 pm

### *Grading*

Grades for the course will be based on performance on the exams, satisfactory completion of the film journal, and attendance and participation in discussion sections. The midterm exams will each count for 20 percent of your grade; the final for 30 percent; the film journal for 15 percent; and participation in section for 15 percent.

## LECTURE &amp; FILM SCHEDULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125

		Reading: Chapter from <i>American Society</i>	TOPIC	FILM
1	9/2	1	Prologue: Perspectives and Values	
2	9/7	2	What kind of a country is this?	1. <i>Food, Inc.</i>
<b>Part I. CAPITALISM</b>				
3	9/9	3	The market: how it is supposed to work	
4	9/14	4	The market: How it actually works	2. <i>Plunder</i>
5	9/16	4	The market: How it actually works	
6	9/21	5	The environment	3. <i>An Inconvenient truth</i>
7	9/23	6	Transportation	
8	9/28	7	Consumerism	4. <i>Shop till you drop</i>
9	9/30	8	Health Care	
10	10/5	9	High Road Capitalism	5. <i>Sick around the world (frontline)</i>
	10/7		<b>Midterm #1</b>	
<b>Part II. INEQUALITY</b>				
11	10/12	10	Thinking about Fairness and Inequality	6. <i>The American Ruling Class</i>
12	10/14	11	Class	
13	10/19	12	Persistent poverty and Rising Inequality	7. <i>The American Dream</i>
14	10/21	13	Ending Poverty in America	
15	10/26	14	Racial Inequality	8. <i>Freedom on my Mind</i> AND <i>Tulia, Texas</i>
16	10/28	14	Racial Inequality, continued	
17	11/2	15	Gender inequality	9. <i>Killing us Softly</i> AND <i>Boys will be Men</i> AND <i>Growing up Female</i>
18	11/4	15	Gender inequality	
	11/9		<b>Midterm #2</b>	
<b>Part III. DEMOCRACY</b>				
19	11/11	16	Democracy : how it works	
20	11/16	16	Democracy, continued	10. <i>Casino Jack and United States of Money</i>
21	11/18	17	Elections and voting	
22	11/23	18	Taxation and the Attack on the Affirmative State	11. <i>Constructing public opinion</i> AND <i>Rich Media, Poor Democracy</i>
	11/25		<b>THANKSGIVING</b>	
23	11/30	19	Corporate Control of the Media	12. <i>Why we fight</i>
24	12/2	20	Militarism and Empire	
25	12/7	21	Labor Unions	13. <i>Holding Ground: Rebirth of Dudley Street</i>
26	12/9	22	Democracy from below	
27	12/14	23	Conclusion: Possible Futures	
	12/21	2:45-4:45	<b>Final Examination</b>	

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**DESCRIPTIONS OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS FOR SOCIOLOGY 125**

Film showings are at 7:15, room 6210 Sewell Social Sciences

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September 7 & 8

*Food, Inc.*

<http://www.foodincmovie.com/>

Drawing on [Eric Schlosser's](#) *Fast Food Nation* and [Michael Pollan's](#) *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, director [Robert Kenner](#)'s Oscar-nominated documentary explores the food industry's detrimental effects on our health and environment. Kenner spotlights the men and women who are working to reform an industry rife with monopolies, questionable interpretations of laws and subsidies, political ties and rising rates of *E. coli* outbreaks.

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September 13 & 14

*Plunder*

<http://plunderthecrimeofourtime.com/>

Filmmaker and media critic [Danny Schechter](#) explores how the current financial crisis was built on a foundation of criminal activity, uncovering the connection between the collapse of the housing market and the economic catastrophe that followed. To get the real story, Schechter -- aka "the News Dissector" -- interviews bankers, economists, journalists and even a convicted white-collar criminal who blew the whistle on dishonest business practices.

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September 20 & 21

*An Inconvenient truth*

<http://www.climatecrisis.net/>

Director-producer [Davis Guggenheim](#) (HBO's "Deadwood") captures former Vice President [Al Gore](#) in the midst of waging a passionate campaign -- not for the White House, but for the environment -- in this Oscar-winning documentary. Laying out the facts of global warming without getting political, Gore makes a sobering impression on the audiences who hear his message, urging them to act "boldly, quickly and wisely" ... before it's too late.

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September 27 & 28

*Taken for a Ride*

[http://www.newday.com/films/Taken\\_for\\_a\\_Ride.html](http://www.newday.com/films/Taken_for_a_Ride.html)

Why Does America Have the Worst Public Transit in the Industrialized World, and the Most Freeways? *Taken for a Ride* reveals the tragic and little known story of an auto and oil industry campaign, led by General Motors, to buy and dismantle streetcar lines. Across the nation, tracks were torn up, sometimes overnight, and diesel buses placed on city streets. The highway lobby then pushed through Congress a vast network of urban freeways that doubled the cost of the Interstates, fueled suburban development, increased auto dependence, and elicited passionate opposition. Seventeen city freeways were stopped by citizens who would become the leading edge of a new environmental movement. With investigative journalism, vintage archival footage and candid interviews, *Taken for a Ride* presents a revealing history of our cities in the 20th century that is also a meditation on corporate power, city form, citizen protest and the social and environmental implications of transportation. *Taken for a Ride* was funded by the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

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*Shop till you drop*

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=148>

Are we too materialistic? Are we willfully trashing the planet in our pursuit of things? And what's the source of all this frenetic consumer energy and desire anyway? In a fast-paced tour of the ecological and psychological terrain of American consumer culture, *Shop 'Til You Drop* challenges us to confront these questions head-on. Taking aim at the high-stress, high-octane pace of fast-lane materialism, the film moves beneath the seductive surfaces of the commercial world to show how the flip side of accumulation is depletion -- the slow, steady erosion of both natural resources and basic human values. In the end, *Shop 'Til You Drop* helps us make sense of the economic turbulence of the moment, providing an unflinching, riveting look at the relationship between the limits of consumerism and our never-ending pursuit of happiness.

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October 4 & 5

*Sick around the world (frontline)*

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/>

Five capitalist democracies around the world - Japan, Taiwan, Switzerland, Great Britain, and Germany - all have health care systems that provide health care for everyone. They have higher life expectancies, lower infant mortality rates, and spend less money than the U.S. for health care. At any given time, at least 45 million Americans do not have health insurance. What lessons can the U.S. learn about health care from other countries?

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October 11 & 12

*The American Ruling Class*

<http://www.theamericanrulingclass.org/home/>

This inventive, mildly fictionalized documentary follows noted editor [Lewis Lapham](#) as he introduces two Ivy League graduates to America's elite in an effort to examine the role of class and moneyed privilege in American democracy. With stops at the Pentagon, posh Manhattan parties and more, Lapham encounters luminaries -- including [James Baker III](#) and [Walter Cronkite](#) -- who each share their perspectives on America's ruling class.

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October 18 & 19

*The American Dream*

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C0CE5D71E3CF935A35753C1A966958260>

This film centers around union meatpacking workers at a Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota in the mid-80's. The trouble started when Hormel cut worker pay from \$10.69 an hour to \$8.25 an hour. The problem? Hormel had just posted a net profit of \$30 million. As one worker at a union meeting put it, "If we have to take a cut of \$2.45 an hour when the company just made \$30 million, I hate to think of what's gonna happen when they actually post a loss." With no help from their parent union, International Food and Commercial Workers Union, the local union (P-9) goes on strike alone trying to bring Hormel to its knees. Director Barbara Kopple, who also made the great "Harlan County, USA", does an outstanding job of capturing every important moment. She has the camera there at every union meeting, press release, Hormel press release, etc. She also shows the very personal aspects of a strike going into people's homes and showing their innermost feelings about what's going on. In the end, the strike is long, drawn out, and things appear bleak. The constant Minnesota cold, snow and ice are always in the background as well. If one doesn't have a greater appreciation for unions and what they have to sometimes endure after watching this film, he/she probably didn't pay very good attention.

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October 25 & 26

*Freedom on my Mind*

<http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0037>

This powerful documentary chronicles the Mississippi Voter Registration Project during the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s. Archival footage and contemporary interviews explore early efforts to register disenfranchised blacks, the Freedom Summer drive and the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. *Freedom on My Mind* garnered a Best Documentary Oscar nomination and won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

*Tulia, Texas*

<http://www.tuliatexasfilm.com/>

The film documents an important episode from the late 1990s and early 2000s in the complicated racial history of Texas. The episode made the news a few years ago and quickly faded from our collective memory. The filmmakers present a balanced, if critical, view of the events in a small town in the Texas panhandle and what happened when a rouge undercover cop arrested 46 people - 39 of whom were African-Americans. The 46 people were charged with selling drugs based solely on the evidence of the single undercover cop. While filmmakers clearly side with the victims, they let the sheriff and the undercover cop speak and they weave together the different voices in the town to present the narrative of the events fairly and honestly. The connections between the fear of drugs and racial prejudices are self-evident.

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November 1 & 2

*Killing us Softly*

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=241>

In this new, highly anticipated update of her pioneering *Killing Us Softly* series, the first in more than a decade, Jean Kilbourne takes a fresh look at how advertising traffics in distorted and destructive ideals of femininity. The film marshals a range of new print and television advertisements to lay bare a stunning pattern of damaging gender stereotypes -- images and messages that too often reinforce unrealistic, and unhealthy, perceptions of beauty, perfection, and sexuality. By bringing Kilbourne's groundbreaking analysis up to date, *Killing Us Softly 4* stands to challenge a new generation of students to take advertising seriously, and to think critically about popular culture and its relationship to sexism, eating disorders, and gender violence.

*Boys will be Men*

<http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/boys.html>

Boys are in trouble. The spate of school shootings in 1998 and 1999 amplified a warning being sounded by social scientists. After 20 years of concern over the status of girls raised by the women's movement, some experts say it is boys we need to turn our attention to. There are disturbing statistics to back this up. Four boys are diagnosed as emotionally disturbed for every one girl. Six boys are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder for every one girl. Boys kill themselves five times more often than girls. Boys are four times more likely to drop out of high school than girls are. Girls now outnumber boys entering college. How do boys become men? How do they learn courage, the difference between right and wrong, and the meaning of love? What hurts them, makes them violent, and sometimes kills them? *Boys Will Be Men*, a documentary film about growing up male in America, seeks answers to these questions.

*Growing Up Female*

[http://www.newday.com/films/Growing\\_Up\\_Female.html](http://www.newday.com/films/Growing_Up_Female.html)

**Growing Up Female** is one of the first films of the modern women's movement. Produced in 1971, it caused controversy and exhilaration. It was widely used by consciousness-raising groups to generate interest and help explain feminism to a skeptical society. The film looks at female socialization through a personal look into the lives of six women, age 4 to 35, and the forces that shape them--teachers, counselors, advertising, music and the institution of marriage. It offers us a chance to see how much has changed--and how much remains the same.

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November 15 & 16

*Casino Jack and United States of Money*

<http://www.takepart.com/casinojack>

Documentarian [Alex Gibney](#) (Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room) turns his acute focus on convicted Washington lobbyist [Jack Abramoff](#), reproaching him and other legislators for their negative impact on U.S. politics. Gibney's film plays less like a dry treatise and more like a high-stakes political thriller, fearlessly examining the ways American policies and political processes are undermined by an endless quest for power.

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November 22 & 23

*Constructing public opinion*

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=106>

The media regularly use public opinion polls in their reporting of important news stories. But how exactly do they report them and to what end? In this insightful and accessible interview, Professor Justin Lewis demonstrates the way in which polling data are themselves used by the media to not just reflect what Americans think but instead to construct public opinion itself. Addressing vital issues (e.g., the role the media play in "manufacturing consent" for political elites, what polls really tell us about public opinion, what Americans actually think about politics), *Constructing Public Opinion* provides a new way to think about the relationship between politics, media and the public. Exploding the myth that most Americans are moderate or conservative, *Constructing Public Opinion* demonstrates the way in which political elites help to promote the military industrial complex and how the media sustains belief in an electoral system with a built-in bias against the interests of ordinary people. Well illustrated with graphics and many examples of media coverage, it is the first film of its kind to present a critical analysis of media and public opinion.

*Rich Media, Poor Democracy*

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=118>

If a key indicator of the health of a democracy is the state of its journalism, the United States is in deep trouble. In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Robert McChesney lays the blame for this state of affairs squarely at the doors of the corporate boardrooms of big media, which far from delivering on their promises of more choice and more diversity, have organized a system characterized by a lack of competition, homogenization of opinion and formulaic programming. Through numerous examples, McChesney, and media scholar, Mark Crispin Miller, demonstrate how journalism has been compromised by the corporate bosses of conglomerates such as *Disney, Sony, Viacom, News Corp, and AOL Time Warner* to produce a system of news that is high on sensationalism and low on information. They suggest that unless citizen activism can reclaim the commons, this new corporate system will be characterized by a rich media and an ever impoverished, poor democracy.

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November 29 & 30

*Why we fight*

<http://www.sonyclassics.com/whywefight/>

Filmed during the Iraq War, [Eugene Jarecki](#)'s Sundance Grand Jury Award-winning documentary dissects America's military machine with a keen eye to answering a necessary question: Why do we engage in war? Through personal stories of soldiers, government officials, scholars, journalists and innocent victims, the film examines the political and economic interests and ideological factors, past and present, behind American militarism.

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December 6 & 7

*Holding Ground: Rebirth of Dudley Street*

[http://www.newday.com/films/Holding\\_Ground.html](http://www.newday.com/films/Holding_Ground.html)

*Holding Ground* is at once a cautionary tale of urban policies gone wrong and a message of hope for all American cities. In 1985, African-American, Latino, Cape Verdean, and European-American residents in Roxbury, MA united to revitalize their community. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative went on to gain national recognition as residents fought to close down illegal dumps, gain unprecedented control of land from City Hall and create a comprehensive plan to rebuild the fabric of their community. Through the voices of committed residents, activists and city officials, this moving documentary shows how a Boston neighborhood was able to create and carry out its own agenda for change.

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