

Contemporary Social Issues: SOC 1020
MTWRF 10:10am-12:00pm
Buttrick Hall 202

Instructor

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Course Description

The discipline of sociology developed to analyze how the social world developed into what it is today. The Great Transformation—the shift from traditional to modern society including the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the French Revolution of 1789—consisted of intellectual, economic, and social changes that required explanation. Sociology developed to understand and explain how these changes occurred and their consequences. Early sociologists, including August Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, all sought to explain how Europe had changed and in doing so developed the sociological discipline.

Sociologists are still guided by many of the same fundamental questions that influenced early sociology. However, our society and the tools we use to study it have become more complex. Economies are increasingly globalized leading to more diverse, pluralistic societies as well as the globalization of labor markets, which obscures much of the exploitation involved in commodity production. Understanding our domestic economy and current industrial trends in the United States now more than ever requires a global approach and a keen eye toward the power dynamics that underlie our society.

In this course, we will explore how sociology examines society and try to answer several basic questions:

- **First, how do we describe the country that we live in?** In order to understand the problems of a society, we must first understand and describe our current system and understand it's historical context. Sociology is an empirically driven social science that develops social theory out of systematic social observation. Sociologists use a variety of methods to examine social processes and aim to understand the implicit and explicit ways that individuals affect social structures and how social structures affect individuals.
- **Second, what are the “rules” that govern our society?** Once we can describe a society, we need to understand how that society creates order, laws, regulations, and norms. Few rules in society are neutral. What is regulated and who is affected (both positively and negatively) by social rules is not predetermined but created by certain interests in society. Many present-day rules were created in a historical context and their impacts were not fully realized until after their implementation.
- **Finally, how do we evaluate our current society?** Evaluation invites a subjective interpretation of society. Each of us brings our backgrounds and values to our opinions of what social life *should* look like. The United States is characterized by deep political divisions between social groups with different priorities for society. During a presidential election year, the values that guide our society come to the forefront of political

discourse. Wright and Rogers (2015) identify five American values that are widely agreed upon across political divisions. Throughout the course, we will use these values to understand our own and others' positions.

1. *Freedom*-All individuals should be able to live their lives as they choose and pursue their goals without coercion from others.
2. *Prosperity*-The majority of people in a society should have a high standard of living and all people should have the opportunity to be prosperous.
3. *Efficiency*-The economy should operate rationally by balancing costs and benefits and using resources wisely.
4. *Fairness*-People should be treated justly and have equal opportunity to educational and economic success without unfair privileges or disadvantages.
5. *Democracy*-Public decisions should reflect the collective will of citizens equally, not just the will of elites.

The five American values above seem to be straight-forward ideals, but social policy must balance conflicts among these values. The political parties in the United States tend to value some ideals over others and, when conflicts among values exist, the parties make policies following the values they prioritize. Understanding where tradeoffs in social values occur allows us to better evaluate how well our society is functioning and how we can improve it.

Sociology does not provide simple answers to the problems that our society faces. However, sociology does provide a toolkit of theories and methodologies to help us describe, understand, and evaluate societies and social processes. Elections and the media tend to simplify social problems into simple solutions. Sociology challenges simple explanations by showing the complexity of social issues within any society and economy, especially one that is rapidly becoming more complicated. In this class, we will examine several pressing social issues for our society including persistent poverty, racial inequality, gender inequality, health disparities, climate change, and mass incarceration. The major problems of our time are solvable if we can understand the past, present, and future of social ills.

Learning Goals

- Learn to read and write like a social scientist.
- Develop a nuanced understanding of how economic forces shape social life.
- Use the sociological imagination to critically analyze social issues.
- Apply sociological concepts to your own life and interactions.
- Examine and critique sociological methodologies' strengths and weaknesses.
- Understand how systems of power and inequality intersect to create social issues and individuals' social contexts.

Required Materials

Three books are required for this course.

1. Wright, Erik Olin, and Joel Rogers. (2015). *American Society: How it Really Works, second edition*. WW Norton & Company.

2. Alexander, Michelle. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press. (E-book available through the library; referred to as TNJC)
3. Cotes, Ta-Nehisi. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau.

Grading

5%-Participation & in-class work
15%-Short paper 1
15%-Short paper 2
20%-Midterm exam
5%-Final paper proposal
10%-Final presentation
30%-Final paper

Grade Scale

A: 93-100; A-: 90-92
B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82
C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72
D+: 67-69; D: 63-66; D-: 60-62
F: <=59

Assignments

Short Paper 1:

The first short paper will be a sociological autobiography which draws from our readings and discussions about capitalism and economic sociology. Following C. Wright Mills' proposition that sociology is the study of biography and history, how has your biography been affected by larger social and economic shifts in your lifetime, or before? What are the major social factors that have led you to where you are in your life course? How have your socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual identity, ability, and other social statuses affected your experience in society? The paper should be 4-5 pages.

Midterm Exam

The midterm exam will be a take-home exam where you will be asked to answer several questions. The exam is posted on Blackboard. I will not accept the exam early. You will need to incorporate examples from the textbook and from lecture into your answers.

Short Paper 2:

The second short paper will address a social issue that you find important. You will choose the topic and write 4-5 pages describing the social issue, examining how the issue is affected by or contributes to social stratification, highlighting the differing perspectives on how to ameliorate the issue, and proposing solutions to reduce the impact of the social issue. You will need to use

at least FOUR sources from the popular media and ONE article from a social science journal which uses empirical data to analyze an aspect of the social issue.

The topic for the second short paper should differ from the the topic for your final paper. The two topics can be related but your focus should be distinct.

Final Paper:

In groups of two, you will select a social issue to research for the final paper. There are three due dates for the final paper. First, a project proposal where you and your partner will select your topic. Second, a in-class project presentation where you will share information about the social issue you select. Third, an 8-10-page joint paper examining your topic in depth. Additional information will be given about the requirements and grading for the final paper and presentation.

Course Expectations/Policies

Participation: I will not take formal attendance throughout the semester. However, due to the small class size and daily meetings, regular attendance is expected and absences will be noticed. Completion of in-class assignments and classroom participation will account for 5% of your grade. It is advantageous to your grade to prepare for class, attend class, participate in discussions, and be a good classroom citizen.

Citations: All materials used for written assignments should be cited. Any citation style with parenthetical in-text citations can be used. See the Purdue Online Writing Lab website for information on American Sociological Association style and other citation styles.
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/583/01/>

Electronics: Use of computers is allowed as long as they do not distract from classroom discussion. Please use technology in ways that enhance learning and do not cause distraction for you or other students.

Classroom Citizenship: This class will discuss challenging topics which may prompt considerable disagreement among the class members. Having differing viewpoints is an asset for learning only if we can treat each other's experiences and ideas with respect and civility. In classroom discussions, we will work to create a community of learners who support one another despite our differences.

Disability accommodations: If you need accommodations due to a disability please let me know as soon as possible so that your needs may be properly addressed. The Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services (EAD) office provides confidential assistance with identifying needed accommodations.

Content advisory: Discussing the current challenges to our society can be difficult since we all have some relationship to the issues we discuss. Many students have had experiences in their lives that may make some topics especially difficult to discuss. If you think that some topics will

be difficult for you, please see me so that we can discuss ways to make the course more accessible to your needs.

Course Schedule*					
Class Session	Day	Date	Topic	Reading	Due
Part 1: Capitalism, or “It’s the economy, stupid”					
1	Tuesday	6/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syllabus and course introduction Sociological imagination and the life course 		
2	Wednesday	6/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sociological imagination- history and biography 	AS 1, 2	
3	Thursday	6/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalism intro and Marx 	AS 3	
4	Friday	6/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Globalization and value chains Film: <i>The True Cost</i> 	AS 4	
5	Monday	6/13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minority stress/Anti-LGBT violence The environment and climate change 	AS 5	
6	Tuesday	6/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Film: <i>Cowspericy</i> 	AS 7	
7	Wednesday	6/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health disparities Film: <i>Unnatural causes, Hour 1</i> 	AS 8	
8	Thursday	6/16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Industrial transitions 	AS 10	
Part 2: Inequality					
9	Friday	6/17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social change and class structure Deindustrialization 	AS 11, 12	Short Paper 1
10	Monday	6/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent poverty 	AS 13, 14	
11	Tuesday	6/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender inequality Film: <i>Miss Representation</i> 	AS 16	
12	Wednesday	6/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender inequality (cont.) 	AS 16	Last withdrawal date
13	Thursday	6/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Unnatural Causes, Hour 2</i> “W.E.B DuBois: Founder of American Sociology” 	AS 15	
Part 3: The case of mass incarceration					
14	Friday	6/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DuBois (cont.) 	TNJC: Intro., Ch. 1	Mid-term exam due
15	Monday	6/27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alice Goffman TED talk Policing 	TNJC: Ch. 2, 3	Project proposal due
16	Tuesday	6/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Angola prison documentary 	TNJC: Ch. 4, 5	
17	Wednesday	6/29		TNJC: Ch. 6	
18	Thursday	6/30		BWM: Part 1	Short Paper 2

19	Friday	7/1		BWM: Part 2	
	Monday	7/4	<i>Holiday-No Class</i>		
Part 4: Democracy					
20	Tuesday	7/5	• Film: <i>Manufacturing Consent</i>	AS 17, 18	
21	Wednesday	7/6		AS 19	
22	Thursday	7/7	• Presentations	AS 24	Final paper due
*The course schedule may change during the semester; all changes will be posted to Blackboard.					