

Contemporary Social Issues: SOC 1020

MWF 2:10pm-3:00pm

Wilson 112

Instructor

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Course Description

The discipline of sociology developed to analyze how the social world became 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 was used 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. During a presidential election year, the topics we are addressing take on an additional significance since the electoral process will guide the trajectory of the United States for years to come.

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.

- 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)
- Cotes, Ta-Nehisi. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau.

Grading

5%-Participation & in-class work
15%-Reflections (7.5% each)
15%-Short paper 1
20%-Short paper 2
20%-Midterm exam
25%-Final exam

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

Reflections:

Understanding social issues is a personal process as well as an intellectual endeavor. Throughout the semester, you will write TWO reflections about a topic we cover in class. We will cover multinational commodity production, the environment and climate change, food systems, health care, socioeconomic inequality, gender inequality, racial inequality, and mass incarceration. After we cover the topic in class, you should write a 1-2-page reflection that thoughtfully engages with our class discussions and your perspectives on the subject. You should address if and how your perspective has developed or changed through lecture and discussion. I will collect the reflections throughout the semester and you can choose when to complete reflections; however, ideally you will turn in reflections soon after the topic is covered in class.

Each reflection is worth 7.5% of the final grade. Reflections will be graded on three criteria:

- The author clearly and succinctly describes the social issue, its implications for society, and connects the issue explicitly to the Wright and Rogers (2015) textbook.
- The author discusses their previous knowledge of the issue, what they learned about the issue, and how your opinions have developed on the topic.
- The reflection is written clearly, demonstrates critical engagement with course themes, and is free of grammatical errors.

All three reflections must be turned in by Monday, November 28th.

Short Paper 1:

The first short paper will be a sociological autobiography of a social issue. Each of us has interacted with many of the social problems we will discuss throughout the semester. For this paper, you will draw from your biography and history to understand a contemporary issue of your choosing. The issue may be something that you or your family has experienced or an issue that you care about. Drawing from your experiences rooted in your social statuses (socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual identity, ability, and other social statuses) and the readings from the course, you should describe the social issue you choose, your relationship to the issue, and the historical context in which you encounter the issue.

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 different from your first paper 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.

Final Exam:

The final exam will be a similar format to the midterm exam with several short answer questions. You may turn in the final on the last day of class or at 3:00pm on Friday, December 16th. Questions will be posted on Blackboard after the mid-term exam is due.

Course Expectations/Policies*Participation:*

I will not take formal attendance throughout the semester, only the first few weeks as recommended by the university. However, habitual absences are often noticeable and will negatively impact your participation grade. 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.

Assignment Formatting:

All assignments should be typed and a hard copy should be submitted in class. The text should be double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, and have 1" margins on all sides.

For reflections, your name should appear in the top right corner of the document with the date you turn the assignment in and the reflection number (i.e. 1, 2, or 3). The name header should be single spaced.

For the short papers and exams, please DO NOT print your name on the document. Instead, please write your name on the back of the document. I will bring post-it notes for you to cover your name. I will bring a sign-in sheet to class to mark that you turned in the assignment. Masking your name helps to reduce bias in grading and improves feedback on your written work.

Citations:

All materials used for written assignments should be cited. Citation styles with parenthetical in-text citations can be used. ASA style is the most common in sociology and APA style is common across psychology and interdisciplinary journals. 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/>

Late Work Policy:

All assignments will be collected in-class. Print copies of all assignments are expected unless online submission is discussed with the instructor before the assignment is due. Assignments are considered late if they are not turned in by the end of class on the day they are due. Each 24-hour period after the due date will count as one day late and a penalty of 10% per day will be applied. Late penalties accrue over the weekend and days class does not meet, therefore please email the assignment to stop the accrual of late penalties if class is not meeting that day then provide a print copy during the next class session.

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.

Campus resources: Vanderbilt has a variety of resources that are meant to help you succeed in your college career. A list of on-campus student resources can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/iicc/resources/on-campus-resources/>. Additionally, Vanderbilt Writing Studio offers assistance with writing and editing assignments. I am happy to assist you with writing, but the writing studio is another resource that I highly recommend. Information can be found at: <http://vanderbilt.edu/writing/>.

Course Schedule*					
Week	Day	Date	Topic	Reading	Due
Part 1: Capitalism, or “It’s the economy, stupid”					
1	Wednesday	8/24	NO CLASS		
	Friday	8/26	Course introduction	http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2016/08/15/vanderbilt-remove-confederate-building-name/88771680/ http://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/08/vanderbilt-confederate-hall/495941/ Vanderbilt Diversity History Blackboard	
2	Monday	8/29	Syllabus Sociological imagination	AS 1 Mills, “Sociological Imagination” Blackboard	
	Wednesday	8/31	Capitalism	AS 2	
	Friday	9/2	Marx	AS 3	
3	Monday	9/5	Sociological Methods	AS 4	
	Wednesday	9/7	Film: <i>The True Cost</i>	AS 5	
	Friday	9/9	Film: <i>The True Cost</i>	AS 7	
4	Monday	9/12	Environmental Sociology	Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg. (2004) “Interrogating the Treadmill of Production” Blackboard	
	Wednesday	9/14	Film: <i>Cowspiracy</i>	http://science.time.com/2013/12/16/the-triple-whopper-environmental-impact-of-global-meat-production/ http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2012/06/27/155527365/visualizing-a-nation-of-meat-eaters	
	Friday	9/16	Film: <i>Cowspiracy</i>	Winson, <i>The Industrial Diet</i> , excerpt Blackboard	Short Paper 1
5	Monday	9/19	Finish Environment, begin Healthcare	AS 8	

	Wednesday	9/21	US Healthcare	Obama, “United States Health Care Reform” <i>JAMA</i> Blackboard	
	Friday	9/23	Film: <i>Unnatural Causes</i>	http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/04/genes-dont-cause-racial-health-disparities-society-does/389637/	
6	Monday	9/26	Health Disparities	Williams and Sternthal. (2010). “Understanding Racial-ethnic Disparities in Health: Sociological Contributions.” <i>Journal of Health and Social Behavior</i> . 51(S) S15-S27. Blackboard	
	Wednesday	9/28	Deindustrialization	AS 10 p.216-228	
	Friday	9/30	The Great Recession	AS 9	
7	Monday	10/3	Industrial Transitions	AS 10 p. 228-242	
	Part 2: Inequality				
	Wednesday	10/5	The Class Structure	AS p.243-244 & Ch. 11	
	Friday	10/7	Poverty	AS 12	Mid-term exam
8	Monday	10/10	Film: <i>Poor Kids</i>	AS 13	
	Wednesday	10/12	Poverty	AS14	
	Friday	10/14	NO CLASS-FALL BREAK		
9	Monday	10/17	Gender inequality Film: <i>Miss Representation</i>	Shapiro, “Introduction” from <i>Gender Circuits</i> Blackboard	
	Wednesday	10/19	Finish film	AS 16	
	Friday	10/21	Gender	AS 16	
10	Monday	10/24	Race in the US	AS 15	
	Wednesday	10/26	W.E.B. DuBois	AS 15	
	Friday	10/28	DuBois (Cont.)	DuBois, “The Black Worker” and “The White Worker” Blackboard	Short Paper 2

Part 3: Mass Incarceration					
11	Monday	10/31	Prisons and Jails	TNJC Intro, Ch. 1	
	Wednesday	11/2	Film: <i>The War on Weed</i>	TNJC Ch. 2	
	Friday	11/4	The Drug War	TNJC Ch. 3	
12	Monday	11/7	Prison Facilities and Privatization	DOJ Report on private prisons (skim)	
	Wednesday	11/9	Reentry	TNJC Ch. 4	
	Friday	11/11	The New Jim Crow	TNJC Ch. 5	
13	Monday	11/14	Film: <i>Policing the Police</i>	TNJC Ch. 6	
	Wednesday	11/16	Film clip: <i>The Case for Reparations</i> Verstehen and institutional inequality	BTWM Part 1	
	Friday	11/18		BTWM Part 2 &3	
	Monday	11/21	NO CLASS-THANKSGIVING BREAK		
	Wednesday	11/23			
	Friday	11/25			
Part 4: Democracy					
14	Monday	11/28	Democracy	AS 17	Reflection papers due
	Wednesday	11/30	Elections	AS18	
	Friday	12/2	Taxes	AS 19	
15	Monday	12/5	Labor Unions	AS 22	
	Wednesday	12/7	Envisioning Futures	AS 24	
	Friday	12/16	3:00 pm: Scheduled final exam		Final Exam
*The course schedule may change during the semester; all changes will be posted to Blackboard.					