

American Society: how it really works

Sociology 125 - Fall 2015 – University of Wisconsin, Department of Sociology

Professor Joseph Conti
8112B, Sewell Social Science Building
jconti@ssc.wisc.edu

Office hours: 11-1 on Mondays and by appointment

Course Description. What kind of country do we live in? This course provides an extended answer to the question of what kind of a country we live in. It also explores the implications of that answer for understanding, and making progress in solving, some of the social problems that confront America today.

To approach the question of what kind of country we live in, this class will be organized around three key values that most Americans believe our society should realize:

- *Efficiency* – the idea that the economy allocates scarce resources in ways that reflect social values, is driven by “free choice” among consumers, and uses inputs to maximum advantage
- *Fairness* – the idea that we live in a land of equal opportunity and justice, without unfair privileges and disadvantages.
- *Democracy* – the idea that our public decisions reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than those of powerful 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?*

The course is organized into three large sections corresponding to each of the three values. Within each section we will examine what the value means and how it is expressed in contemporary American society. The goal of this course is to provide you with “tools” for thinking about contemporary American society that will help you think through the complexity and make sense of what is important.

Department learning objectives. Beyond the specific content I will cover in this course, I have designed this course to achieve the following instructional objectives designated as priorities by the Department of sociology:

- *Critically Evaluate Published Research.* Sociology graduates will be able to read and evaluate published research as it appears in academic journals and popular or policy publications.
- *Communicate Skillfully:* Sociology majors write papers and make oral presentations that build arguments and assess evidence in a clear and effective manner.
- *Critical Thinking about Society and Social Processes:* Sociology graduates can look beyond the surface of issues to discover the “why” and “how” of social order and structure and consider the underlying social mechanisms that may be creating a situation, identify evidence that may

adjudicate between alternate explanations for phenomena, and develop proposed policies or action plans in light of theory and data.

- *See Things from a Global Perspective*: Sociologists learn about different cultures, groups, and societies across both time and place. They are aware of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among residents of the United States. They understand the ways events and processes in one country are linked to those in other countries.

Course Requirements. Students are expected to show up for and participate in every class having completed the readings. If you have a problem of *any* kind with attendance, let me know what's up.

Reading. There is one required book for the course: *American Society: How it Really Works*, by Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (W.W. Norton, 2015). It is important to obtain the second edition. It is available at the Rainbow Book Store (426 West Gilman Street, Madison, WI 53703-1009; 608-257-6050).

Wright and Rogers have arranged with Rainbow to reduce the cost of new copies of *American Society* purchased there by what they would ordinarily get (pre-tax!) in royalties (about \$4.50). This arrangement is not available with any other bookstore and I have made no arrangements for *American Society* availability elsewhere, but you can certainly find it at many bookstores and online.

A reserve copy of *American Society* will be available at the Helen C. White Library.

There are also a few supplementary readings and videos that are available for free through the learn@UW website for this course. Heavy emphasis will be placed on discussion of these readings in class. Students are expected to have completed the readings and watched the videos prior to class.

Policy Brief. Students will craft a policy brief that identifies and describes an issue of public concern and then proposes a set of policies designed to remedy the problem. Identification and description of the problem, including the mechanisms involved in or reasons for the problem, should be well researched, drawing on class materials as well as other high-quality sources. Proposed policies should be “reasonable,” by which I mean policies that could be enacted in theory even if in the current climate it seems unlikely. Briefs should also provide a “policy analysis,” which considers the likely effectiveness of the proposed solutions, any possible negative repercussions or side-effects, and what kind of political/cultural/economic conditions that would have to prevail for the policy to be effective. You may wish to think about what it would take to create the right conditions.

Evaluation will be based on the following criteria:

- A clearly defined, well-researched problem, including an analysis of the mechanisms through which the problem is created
- Use of appropriate evidence.
- Persuasive connection between the problem and proposed policy
- Clarity of the policy analysis
- “Details:” citations, writing, proofreading, evidence of effort and care, etc.

The policy brief will be 5-6 pages, double-spaced, normal fonts and margins. Don't try to game the document set-up. That's annoying. This assignment is worth 15% of your final grade and will be due in class December 8.

Exams. There will be two mid-terms and one in-class final. The exams will be a combination of short-answer and short essay questions. The exams are not cumulative. Each exam is worth 20% of your final grade.

Attendance, Participation, Quizzes, and Reading Interrogations. Students are required to attend class having read the assigned material for the day. Speaking in class will enhance your grade.

Quizzes. Short quizzes will be given at the beginning of class to assess reading comprehension. If you have read, you will find these quizzes easy. Do the reading. Quizzes are worth 10% of your final grade.

Interrogations. Each week a set of students in the class will prepare short written “interrogations”, 150-300 words long, engaging some theme or problem in the reading. These interrogations should NOT be summaries or exegeses of the texts; nor should they be mini-essays with extended commentaries on the readings. The point is to pose focused questions that will serve as the basis for the seminar discussion. As you do the reading each week, think about an issue that you really want discussed and clarified, and then formulate an interrogation to set up that discussion. While you will need to explicate each question you pose – that is, lay out what you see are the issues in play in the question, explain what you mean by it, etc. – you do not need to stake out a position with respect to the issues you raise (although you can do this if you want to). The important thing is to pose a clear question that you want to discuss. It is entirely appropriate for questions to focus on ideas, arguments, or passages that you do not understand. It often turns out that questions mainly concerned with asking for clarification of some obscure formulation in the reading provoke especially good discussions in the class. What you should avoid is a list of unelaborated questions or mere summarization.

- Students will write 5 interrogations over the course of the semester.
- Students submitting interrogations will lead-off class discussion of those readings.
- Interrogations are due to me (via the drop box at Learn@UW) no later than 3pm on the day before class. There are no exceptions or make-up for late interrogations.
- Please contact me *immediately* if you have a scheduling conflict.

The due dates for reading interrogations are noted in the lecture and reading schedule below. The capital letters (A through E) correspond to the letter assigned to you on the first day of class. Interrogations are worth 10% of your final grade.

Grading. Your grade will be determined by performance on the exams, final paper, and attendance and participation.

Midterms: 40% (20% each)

Final: 20%

Policy Brief: 15%

Participation, Interrogations, and Quizzes: 25%

This is the grading scale employed in the class:

A = 94%-100%, AB = 88%-93%, B = 83%-87%, BC = 78%-82%, C = 70%-77%,
D = 60%-69%, F = 59% or below.

Accommodations. Please send the instructor an email by the end of the second week of the course if you are eligible for special arrangements or accommodations for testing, assignments, or other aspects of the course. This may be the case if English is your second language or you experience a physical or psychological condition that makes it difficult for you to complete assignments and/or exams without some modification of those tasks. Accommodations are provided for students who qualify for disability services through the [McBurney Center](#). Their website has detailed instructions about how to qualify: <http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu> . Provide a copy of your accommodations request (VISA) to the instructor by the end of the second week of class. We try to reserve rooms and proctors by the third week in class, so we must know of all accommodations by then.

If you wish to request a scheduling accommodation for religious observances, send an email by the end of the second week of the course stating the specific date(s) for which you request accommodation; campus policy requires that religious observances be accommodated if you make a timely request early in the term. See the university's [web page](#) for details:
<https://kb.wisc.edu/page.php?id=21698>

Academic honesty. As with all courses at the University of Wisconsin, you are expected to follow the University's rules and regulations pertaining to academic honesty and integrity. The standards are outlined by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#) at <http://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity>

According to University of Wisconsin Statute 14, academic misconduct is defined as:

- seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation;
- uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise;
- forges or falsifies academic documents or records;
- intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others;
- engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of a student's academic performance;
- assists other students in any of these acts.

For a complete description of behaviors that violate the University's standards as well the disciplinary penalties and procedures, please see the Dean of Students [website](#):
<http://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity> . If you have questions about the rules for any of the assignments or exams, please ask your instructor.

Departmental notice of grievance and appeal rights. The Department of Sociology regularly conducts student evaluations of all professors and teaching assistants near the end of the semester. Students who have more immediate concerns about this course should report them to the instructor or to the chair, 8128 Social Science (Pamela.oliver@wisc.edu).

LECTURE AND READING SCHEDULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125

3-SEP INTRODUCTION
• W/R, Chapter 1

8-SEP WHAT KIND OF A COUNTRY IS THIS?
• W/R, Chapter 2

- C. Wright Mills – excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination*

PART I. CAPITALISM

- 10-SEP THE MARKET: HOW IT IS SUPPOSED TO WORK (A)
- W/R Chapter 3
 - Friedman, Milton and Rose Friedman. 1980. “The Power of the Market” pp-9-37 in *Free to Chose: a Personal Statement*. San Diego: Harvest Books.
 - Excerpts from Ayn Rand:
 - “From Roarks’s Speech”
 - “Why Selfishness?”
 - “From John Galt’s Speech”
- 15-SEP THE MARKET: HOW IT ACTUALLY WORKS (B)
- W/R, Chapter 4
 - Kimeldorf et al.: “Consumers with a conscience: Will they Pay More?”
- 17-SEP THE ENVIRONMENT (C)
- W/R, Chapter 5
- 22-SEP TRANSPORTATION (D)
- W/R, Chapter 6
- 24-SEP CONSUMERISM (E)
- W/R, Chapter 7
 - Twitchell – “Two Cheers for Materialism”
- 29-SEP HEALTH CARE (A)
- W/R, Chapter 8
 - Gladwell: “The Moral Hazard Myth”
- 1-OCT THE MARKET: FINANCE (B)
- W/R: Chapter 9
- 6-OCT HIGH ROAD CAPITALISM (****GROUPS C AND E****)
- W/R, Chapter 10
 - “High Road or Low Road: Job Quality in the New Green Economy” (read pages: 5-8, 11-19)
- 8-OCT MIDTERM #1
- ### PART II. INEQUALITY
- 13-OCT THINKING ABOUT FAIRNESS
- W/R, Chapter 11 (D)
 - Fischer et al., “Inequality by Design.”
- 15-OCT CLASS INEQUALITY
- W/R, Chapter 12 (E)

- Lareau: “Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life”
- Smeeding, “Poorer by Comparison: Poverty, Work, and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective.”

20-OCT PERSISTENT POVERTY (A)

- W/R, Chapter 13
- Ehrenreich: excerpt from “Nickel and Dimed”
- Watch: excerpt from “The American Ruling Class”

22-OCT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: WHAT CAN BE DONE? (B)

- W/R, Chapter 14
- “Guaranteed Income’s Moment in the Sun”

27-OCT RACIAL INEQUALITY (C)

- W/R, Chapter 15

29-OCT RACIAL INEQUALITY, CONTINUED (D)

- Levine – “Testimony of Harry Levine Regarding New York State Senate Bill 5187”
- Western and Petit – “Beyond Crime and Punishment” Prisons and Inequality”
- Goffman – “On The Run”
- NYT: “Recording Points to Race Factor in Stops”
- *Optional*: Mason – “Jay-Z’s 99 Problems, Verse 2: A Close Reading with Fourth Amendment Guidance for Cops and Perps”

3-NOV GENDER INEQUALITY (E)

- W/R, Chapter 16
- Lorber, Judith, “The Social Construction of Gender.”

5-NOV GENDER INEQUALITY, CONTINUED (A)

- Jacobs: “Detours on the Road to Equality”
- Hoschild – “Second Shift”
- Blau and Kahn, “The Gender Pay Gap.”

10-NOV MIDTERM #2

PART III. DEMOCRACY

12-NOV CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY: HOW IT WORKS (B)

- W/R, Chapter 17
- Putnam – “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”
- Granovetter – “The strength of weak ties”

17-NOV VOTING, PARTIES, ELECTORAL RULES, CAMPAIGN FINANCE (C)

- W/R, CHAPTER 18

19-NOV DEMOCRACY AND TAXATION (D)

- W/R, Chapter 19

24-NOV DEMOCRACY AND CORPORATE MEDIA (E)

- W/R, Chapter 20
- Watch: “Jon Stewart Interviews Jim Cramer” (3 parts)

26-NOV **THANKSGIVING**

1-DEC MILITARISM & EMPIRE (A)

- W/R, Chapter 21
- Watch: “Eisenhower’s Farewell Address”

3-DEC UNIONS AND DEMOCRACY (B)

- W/R, Chapter 22
- Rosenfeld, “Little Labor: How Union Decline is Changing the American Landscape”

8-DEC DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW (C) ---**POLICY BRIEF DUE IN CLASS**

- W/R, Chapter 23

10-DEC THE BIG LESSONS FROM THE COURSE (D)

- W/R, Chapter 24
- Edmundson, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

15-DEC **IN-CLASS FINAL**