

SOCIOLOGY 125: FALL 2015
AMERICAN SOCIETY: HOW IT REALLY WORKS

LECTURES: M 5:30-8:00 PM, 6210 Sewell Social Science Building (SSSB)

PROFESSOR JOEL ROGERS

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Office Hours: M 4-5 PM or by appointment (*via* mbright@cow.s.org)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

What kind of society do we live in? What does it even mean to talk about a “kind” of society? We all know what it means to ask of a strange animal “what kind of animal/mineral is this?” But it’s less clear what it means to ask that question of a society. This is partly because societies involve people, with minds and passions, whose behavior is hard to predict. And it’s partly because societies change. A leopard can’t change its spots. But societies can and often do become, for example, more or less productive in their economic organization, more or less equal in their distribution of opportunity to members, or more or less democratic.

This course provides an extended answer to the question of *What kind of a society is the United States?* It also explores the implications of that answer for understanding and making progress on solving some of the problems that confront America today. Our discussion revolves around five key values that most Americans believe this society should realize:

1. *Freedom*: the idea that members of the society should be able, to the greatest degree possible, to live their lives as they wish;
2. *Prosperity*: the idea that the society’s economy should generate the highest possible standard of living;
3. *Efficiency*: the idea that the economy should be maximally precise in allocating product to needs and wants, and maximally efficient in productive use of scarce resources;
4. *Fairness*: the idea that members of the society should enjoy equal protection of the law and equal opportunity to make something of their lives;
5. *Democracy*: the idea that public decisions should reflect the collective will of equal citizens, not powerful and privileged 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?*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS, GRADING, OTHER

Readings — With the exception of a few items I may post to your Learn@UW and the Gettysburg Address printed at the end of this syllabus, the only required reading for this is *American Society: How it Really Works 2nd Edition* (AS). This book, written by Erik Olin Wright and me, is based on ideas and themes we developed in this course over several years of teaching it. AS is available for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, an independent bookstore cooperative located at 426 W. Gilman Street (between State and University). Wright and I have arranged with Rainbow to reduce the cost of new copies of AS purchased there by what we'd ordinarily get (pre-tax) in royalties. We don't have this royalty-waiver arrangement with any other bookstore and have made no arrangements for AS's availability elsewhere, but you can certainly find it at many bookstores and are welcome to pay more.

Lectures & Sections — You are expected to attend and come prepared for all lectures and discussion section meetings. Lectures are complementary to, not only explanatory of, the reading from AS covered in them, and will often cover material not in that book. Preparation for a lecture minimally means *having already done* the reading from AS discussed in it. Preparation for discussion sections means *coming prepared* to speak on (not just list) at least one thing from the immediately preceding readings or lecture that you do not fully understand or are not sure you understand and/or something that you disagree with, on which you'd like more discussion. Your TA will require at least some (perhaps all) of these discussion-requests from you in writing.

NB: If you cannot meet any of the above requirements of attendance or preparation, please let your TA know *in advance* of their expected performance, and give a reason for why you're not doing them.

Exams — There are three exams in this class: two midterms and one final. Midterm 1 will cover the course content corresponding to lectures 1-5; Midterm 2 will cover the course content corresponding to lectures of 6-9; the Final will concentrate (about 60%) on the course content corresponding to lectures 10-14 but also include questions raised by other parts of the course. All the exams are multiple-choice. They are not designed to test for creativity, simply your understanding of the material covered in lecture and section. Their dates, times, and locations are:

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| Midterm 1 | Monday, October 19 (first half of class period, 6210 SSSB) |
| Midterm 2 | Monday, November 16 (first half of class period, 6210 SSSB) |
| Final | Monday, December 21 (7:25– 9:25PM, RM TBD) |

Excused Exam Absences and Make-Ups — You will not be excused from any exam or permitted a scheduled make-up unless you provide (a) in advance of the relevant exam, written notice of absence and a compelling justification of it and (b) after the relevant exam, documentation of the truth of this proffered justification.

Grading — Grades for the course will be based on performance on the exams and contribution to section. The midterm exams will each count for 20 percent of final grades; the final and section performance each for 30 percent. No honors credit is available for this course.

Accommodations — By September 25 (the end of the second week of class), please notify both

me and your TA 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 me and your TA by 9/25. We'll try to reserve rooms and proctors the week following, so should be able to tell you all details of your accommodations by then. Similarly, if you wish to request a scheduling accommodation for religious observances, send an email to me and your TA by September 25 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 — but not if you don't. See the University's website for details: <http://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, as outlined. The standards are outlined by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#) at <http://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/>

According to UWS 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](#). If you have questions about the rules for any of the assignments or exams, please ask your instructor or one of the TAs.

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).

Department learning objectives — Beyond the specific substantive and methodological 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:

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.

Prepare for Graduate School and the Job Market: Students use their social research skills to identify opportunities for employment or further study, assess their qualifications for these opportunities, and identify strategies for gaining the necessary knowledge and experience to improve their qualifications. Students are encouraged to develop and maintain portfolios of their written work and educational experiences to aid them in preparing applications.

Manners— This is a large class. In lecture, please behave in a way that shows respect for your colleagues and is minimally distracting to them and the professor. Please turn off cell phones before coming to class and be seated before the class begins. If you are unavoidably late, please come in quietly and sit in the back. Please don't play computer games or watch video during class, or bring food to class or talk privately to colleagues during it. There will be a short break of about 10 minutes around the midpoint of each lecture. Please observe its limits.

LECTURE SCHEDULE

Below, from left to right, are lecture numbers, their date, and the AS chapters assigned to them, and their topic. Also, the dates and times of your two midterms and the final exam.

Introduction

1 9/14 1-2 Introduction to class, what kind of a society this is

Part 1: Market capitalism

2 9/21 3-4 The market

3 9/28 5-6 Environment, transportation

4 10/5 7-8 Consumerism, health care

5 10/12 9-10 Finance, the high road

10/19 Midterm #1 (first hour of class)

Part 2: Inequality

6 10/19 11 Equality, inequality, fairness

7 10/26 12-14 Class, poverty, and ending poverty

8 11/02 15 Racial inequality

9 11/9 16 Gender inequality

11/16 Midterm #2 (first hour of class)

Part 3: Democracy

10 11/16 17 Capitalist democracy

11 11/23 18 Voting, elections

12 11/30 19-20 Taxation, media

13 12/7 21-22 Militarism, unions

14 12/14 23-24 Democracy from below, possible futures, course review

12/21 Final Exam, Room TBD, 7:25p-9:25 PM

GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate — we cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863

Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction.... Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.... I wouldn't give a nickel for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I'd give my whole life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Albert Einstein

Enthusiastic partisans of the idea of progress are in danger of failing to recognize ... the immense riches accumulated by the human race on either side of the narrow furrow on which they keep their eyes fixed; by underrating the achievements of the past, they devalue all those which still remain to be accomplished. If men have always been concerned with only one task — how to create a society fit to live in — the forces which inspired our distant ancestors are also present in us. Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered. What was done, but turned out wrong, can be done again. The “Golden Age,” which blind superstition had placed behind (or ahead of) us, is in us.

Claude Lévi-Strauss