

SOCIOLOGY 125

**CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
SOCIETY**

FALL 2006

**Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:30-3:45
6210 Social Science**

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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 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?*

Readings, Requirements, and Grading

Most of the readings for the course are in a photocopied reader that is available at the Social Science Copy Center. There are also two required books which are available at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman Street:

James Heinz and Nancy Folbre, *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* (The New Press 2006)

Steven Hill, *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy* (PoliPointPress, 2006)

Copies of all readings will be on reserve at H.C. White Library.

Lectures, Readings, Discussion Sections, film series: Students are expected to show up for every class and discussion section and do every reading, 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. If you have a problem getting a hold of *any* of the required readings, let your TA know. If you have any questions about anything else, first talk with your TA.

Film series: We are showing a film series of four documentary films in conjunction with this class. The films will be treated like readings: they are a required part of the course and there will be questions on the exams about the films. On the weeks in which the films are shown, we will have two screenings – one on Tuesday evening at 7:00 and a second on Wednesday evening at 7:00. A full schedule with room numbers will be handed out in class. The movies will also be available at the H.C. White Media Center for individual viewing.

Exams: There will 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. 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	Wednesday, October 11
Midterm #2	Monday, November 13
Final	Friday, December 22 @ 5:05 p.m.

Grading: Your grade will be determined by performance on the exams and attendance and participation in discussion sections. The midterm exams will each count for 25 percent of your grade; the final for 35 percent; and your performance in section for 15 percent.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS				
1	Wednesday	9/6	Introduction	
2	Monday	9/11	What kind of a country is this?	
			Part I. Efficiency	
3	Wednesday	9/13	The market: how it is supposed to work	
4	Monday	9/18	The market: How it actually works	Film: <i>An Inconvenient Truth</i> *
5	Wednesday	9/20	The market: How it actually works	
6	Monday	9/25	The environment	
7	Wednesday	9/27	Transportation	
8	Monday	10/2	Consumerism	
9	Wednesday	10/4	Health Care	
10	Monday	10/9	High Road Capitalism	
	Wednesday	10/11	Midterm #1	
			Part II. Fairness	
11	Monday	10/16	Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness	Film: <i>The Corporation</i> *
12	Wednesday	10/18	Economic Inequality: persistent poverty	
13	Monday	10/23	Economic Inequality: increasing inequality	
14	Wednesday	10/25	Economic Inequality: what can be done?	
15	Monday	10/30	Racial Inequality	
16	Wednesday	11/1	Racial Inequality, continued	
17	Monday	11/6	Gender inequality	Film: <i>Bread and Roses</i> *
18	Wednesday	11/8	Gender inequality	
	Monday	11/13	Midterm #2	
			Part III. Democracy	
19	Wednesday	11/15	Capitalist Democracy : how it works	
20	Monday	11/20	Capitalist Democracy, continued	
21	Wednesday	11/22	Democracy and Taxation	
22	Monday	11/27	Voting, parties, electoral rules, Campaign finance	
23	Wednesday	11/29	Democracy and Corporate Media	
24	Monday	12/4	Militarism & Empire	Film: <i>Why we fight</i> *
25	Wednesday	12/6	Unions and Democracy	
26	Monday	12/11	Democracy from below	
27	Wednesday	12/13	The Big Lessons from the Course	
	Friday	12/22	Final Examination	
* all films will be screened on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at 7:00				

Reading Assignments

1. Wednesday 9/6 Introduction to the Course

no reading assignment

2. Monday 9/11 What kind of a country is this?

[2] Joel Rogers and Erik Olin Wright, "Contemporary American Society: an introduction."
(unpublished manuscript, 2006)

[3] Sam Bowles, *Understanding Capitalism*, pp.3-31, 152-157, 160-164

Part I. Efficiency

3. Wednesday 9/13 The market: how it is supposed to work

[4] Robert Kuttner, "The Resurgent Market", pp. 11-38 in *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

4. Monday 9/18 The market: How it actually works

5. Wednesday 9/20 The market: How it actually works, continued

[5] Robert Kuttner, "The Imperial Market," pp. 39-67 in Kuttner, *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[1] Joel Rogers and Erik Olin Wright, *Contemporary American Society: Key Concepts and Definitions*. A. "Pareto Optimality" and B. "The Prisoner's Dilemma"

6. Monday 9/25 The environment

[6] Richard Caston, *Life in a Business-oriented Society*, (Allyn and Bacon, 1998) chapter 12, "Businesses and Our Environment," pp. 257-270

[7] Peter Montague, "Oceans without Fish," RACHEL'S ENVIRONMENT & HEALTH WEEKLY #587, February 26, 1998.

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide to the U.S. Economy*, chapter 8, pp. 127-144

7. Wednesday 9/27 Transportation

- [8] Bradford Snell, "American Ground Transport", in Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie, *Crisis in American Institutions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1994), pp. 276-289

8. Monday 10/2 Consumerism

- [9] *Do Americans Shop too Much?* By Juliet Schor pp. 1-52

9. Wednesday 10/4 Health Care

- [10] Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Universal Health Care: what the United States can Learn from the Canadian Experience", pp. 293-303 in Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie (eds.), *Crisis in American Institutions* (12th edition, Pearson Publishers 2004)

- [11] Malcolm Gladwell, "The Moral Hazard Myth," *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2005.

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide*, chapter 7, 109-126

10. Monday 10/9 Building "high road" capitalism

- [12] Joel Rogers, "Build the High Road Here", *The Nation* (April 17, 2006)

- [13] Bill Schweke, "A Progressive Economic Development Agenda for Shared Prosperity: Taking The High Road And Closing The Low" (Washington, D.C.: cfed, 2006), pp. 1-16

- [14] Annette Burnhardt, Laura Dresser, and Joel Rogers, "Taking the High Road in Milwaukee," in David Reynolds (ed), *Partnering for change: unions and community groups build coalitions for economic justice.* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004) pp. 231-247

WEDNESDAY 10/11 MIDTERM #1

Part II. Fairness

11. Monday 10/16 Thinking about Equality, Inequality and Fairness

[15] "Is Economic Inequality Beneficial to Society" a debate between George Gilder and William Ryan in Kurt Finsterbusch and George McKenna, *Taking Sides* (7th edition) (Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin Publishing Group, 1992): pp. 90-114

[16] Erik Olin Wright, "The Class Analysis of Poverty," chapter 2 in Erik Olin Wright *Interrogating Inequality* (Verso, 1994).

12. Wednesday 10/18 Economic Inequality: persistent poverty

[17] "Child Poverty in Rich Nations" (UNICEF), Innocenti Report Card Issue No. 1, June 2000, pp. 4-17

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide to the U.S. Economy*, chapter 2, pp. 19-34, chapter 6, pp. 91-108

13. Monday 10/23 Economic Inequality: explaining increasing inequality

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide*, pp. 1-15, 151

[18] Barry Bluestone, "The Inequality Express" *The American Prospect: online edition*, 12.01.95

[19] Paul Krugman, "Graduates versus Oligarchs", *New York Times*, op-ed, Feb. 27, 2006

[20] Chuck Collins & Felice Yeskel, "The Causes of Inequality: why has inequality grown?," in Collins & Yeskel, *Economic Apartheid in America* (New York: New Press, 2006), pp.65-68, 78-88, 104-112

[21] Robert Frank & Philip Cook, "Winner-Take-All markets," in Frank & Cook, *The Winner-take-all-Society* (Penguin, 1995), pp. 1-22.

14. Wednesday 10/25 Economic Inequality: alternatives

[22] Richard Freeman, "Solving the New Inequality," in Freeman, *The New Inequality: Creating Solutions for Poor America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 3-30.

- [23] Erik Olin Wright, "Reducing Income and Wealth Inequality: Real Utopian Proposals," *Contemporary Sociology*, January 2000, pp. 143-155.

15. Monday 10/30 Racial Inequality

16. Wednesday 11/1 Racial Inequality, continued

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide*, chapter 4, pp.55-72

- [24] Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), Chapters 3, "Being Black in America," pp. 35-54 and notes.

- [25] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Color of Suspicion", pp. 141-156 in Jerome Sknick and Elliott Currie (eds.), *Crisis in American Institutions* (12th edition, Pearson Publishers 2004)

- [26] Daniel Golden, "At Many Colleges, the Rich Kids Get Affirmative Action" pp. 157-162 in Jerome Sknick and Elliott Currie (eds.), *Crisis in American Institutions* (12th edition, Pearson Publishers 2004)

- [27] Jenni Gainsborough and Marc Mauer, *Diminishing Returns: Crime and Incarceration in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2000).

17. Monday 11/6 Gender inequality

18. Wednesday 11/8 Gender inequality, continued

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz, *Field Guide*, chapter 3, pp.37-54

- [28] Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1-19, 181-89, 196-201, 250-268

- [29] Robert M. Jackson, *Destined for Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women's Status* (Harvard University Press, 1998) pp. 1-23, 173-75, 191-202, 266-68

MONDAY 11/13 MIDTERM #2

Part III. Democracy

19. Wednesday 11/15 Capitalist Democracy : how it works

20. Monday 11/20 Capitalist Democracy: how it works, continued

[30] “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” report of the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, American Political Science Association, 2004, 22 pages.

[31] Joshua Cohen & Joel Rogers, *On Democracy* (New York: Penguin, 1983), Chapter 3 (“Structure”), pp. 47-87, and notes.

[1] Joel Rogers and Erik Olin Wright, *Contemporary American Society: Key Concepts and Definitions*. C. “The Demand and Resource Constraints in Capitalist Democracy,” and B. “The Prisoner’s Dilemma”

21. Wednesday 11/22 Capitalist Democracy and Taxation

[1] Joel Rogers and Erik Olin Wright, *Contemporary American Society: Concepts and definitions*. D. “The Logic of Taxation.”

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz , *Field Guide*, Chapter 5, 73-90

[32] Chuck Collins & Felice Yeskel, “Taxation,” in Collins & Yeskel, *Economic Apartheid in America* (New York: New Press, 2005), pp. 96-104

22. Monday 11/27 Elections: voting, parties, campaign finance

Steven Hill, *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy* (PoliPointPress, 2006) pp. 1-16, 35-88, 137-152

[33] Robert Dahl, “How Well Does the Constitutional System Perform?” in Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): pp.91-119

[34] Bruce Ackerman & Ian Ayres, *Voting with Dollars: A New Paradigm for Campaign Finance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Chapters 1-2 (“Reforming Reform,” “Patriot”), pp. 3-24

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz , *Field Guide*, pp. 10-11, 88

23. Wednesday 11/29 Democracy and Corporate Media

[35] Robert W. McChesney & John Nichols, *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), Introduction and Chapter 1 “The Problem With the US Media,” pp. 24-80

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz , *Field Guide*, p. 13

Steven Hill, *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy* (PoliPointPress, 2006) pp. 117-136

24. Monday 12/4 Militarism & Empire

[36] Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), Chapters 2, “The Roots of American Militarism,” and chapter 10 “The Sorrows of Empire”, pp. 39-65, 283-312, and notes

[37] Jonathan Shell, “Too Late for Empire”, *The Nation*, August 14/21, 2006, pp. 13-24

Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre and James Heinz , *Field Guide*, pp. 79-80

Zoltan Grossman “A Briefing on the History of U.S. Military Interventions”, available at: <http://www.zmag.org/grossmanciv.htm>

List of US military interventions from 1890-2001: <http://www.zmag.org/list2.htm>

25. Wednesday 12/6 Unions and Democracy

[38] The Silent War: The Assault on Workers’ Freedom to Choose a Union and Bargain Collectively in the United States (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 2002). 23 pages

[39] Richard B. Freeman & Joel Rogers, “Ask the People Who Live There” and “If Workers Could Choose” in Freeman & Rogers, *What Workers Want* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999): 1-14, 140-155.

26. Monday 12/11 Democracy from below

[40] *Ernesto Cortés, Jr. Reweaving the Social Fabric (Boston Review, June/September 1994)*

27. Wednesday 12/13 Imagining alternative futures & The Big Lessons of the Course

Steven Hill, *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy* (PoliPointPress, 2006) pp. 183-196