

American Society: how it really works

Sociology 125 – Fall 2023 – University of Wisconsin, Department of Sociology

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Office hours: Tuesday, 12-2 and by appointment
Canvas URL: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/371130>

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.

This is a three-credit honors course. We will have two 75-minute in-person class periods each week over the fall semester and carries the standard expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, watching videos etc.) for about three hours out of classroom for every class period.

Institutional statement on diversity: [Diversity](#) is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Reading. There is one required book for the course:

- *American Society: How it Really Works*, by Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (2nd edition. W.W. Norton, 2015). It is important to obtain the second edition. It should be available at the University Bookstore.

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

Students are expected to have completed the readings and watched the videos prior to class.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are expected to participate in every class having completed the readings. If you have a problem with *any* kind with attendance, let me know.

Attendance, Participation. Discussion is a core part of this class. Students are required to attend class having read the assigned material for the day. If you have difficulty with speaking in discussions, please arrange to speak with me during office hours.

- Two brief writing assignments will be included as a part of your participation grade.
- Other activities, such as worksheets, discussion posts, and additional writing assignments, may be included in your participation grade. These won't be terribly onerous tasks; they are designed to foster discussion and peer-to-peer learning.

What is to be done? Students will craft a position paper that identifies and describes an issue of public concern and then proposes a set of solutions designed to remedy the problem. The assignment is composed of three parts:

1. Argument overview: a brief statement that characterizes a social problem and *presents an argument* about what could be done. This is a short exercise (about 1 page) and requires no additional research.
2. An annotated bibliography that identifies at least three high-quality external sources and briefly summarizes each for main arguments and findings.
3. The final paper identifies a problem, characterizes the mechanisms creating or preventing the resolution of that problem, and offers a well-justified argument supported by evidence about what could be done to remedy the problem. This paper should draw on class materials and at least three additional, high-quality “external” sources. It should be 8-10 pages, double-spaced, 1" margins, and 12 point font.

This assignment is worth 15% of your final grade. If you are planning on using this paper for a medical school application, please confirm in advance that it meets those requirements. Additional guidance on each aspect of this assignment will be provided.

Exams. There will be two mid-terms and one final. The exams will be a combination of short-answer and short essay questions. The exams are *not* cumulative. Each exam is worth 15% of your final grade. All will be online. Access to the online exam will be made available over a period of days. Once you begin the exam, you will be permitted 75 minutes to complete it.

Quizzes Occasional short online quizzes will be given to assess reading comprehension. If you have read, you will find these quizzes easy. They are *due prior to class time* on the day that they are assigned. Quizzes are online through canvas worth 10% of your final grade.

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

Exams: 45% (15% each)

Final paper (and its elements): 15%

Participation and attendance: 30%

Quizzes: 10%

This is the grading scale employed in the class:

A = 93%-100%, AB = 88%-92%, B = 83%-87%, BC = 78%-82%, C = 70%-77%,
D = 60%-69%, F = 59% or below.

LECTURE AND READING SCHEDULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125

SEPTEMBER 7 INTRODUCTION

- W/R, Chapter 1
- Read syllabus and review module 0 in canvas.

SEPTEMBER 12 WHAT KIND OF A COUNTRY IS THIS?

- W/R, Chapter 2
- C. Wright Mills – excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination*
- **DO:** Identify two quotes from the Mills reading that seem important to you. Bring these to class and be prepared to discuss them.

PART I. CAPITALISM

SEPTEMBER 14 THE MARKET: HOW IT IS SUPPOSED TO WORK

- W/R Chapter 3
 - This is the most important reading, but we will spend time on the other two.
- Friedman, Milton and Rose Friedman. 1980. “The Power of the Market” pp-9-37 in *Free to Choose: a Personal Statement*. San Diego: Harvest Books.
 - Key passages:
 - 11-14 (pp. 14-24 elaborate on the points made at the bottom of page 14);
 - 24-33 on the role of government
- Excerpt from Ayn Rand: “From Roark’s Speech”
 - read pages 71-78
- **Quiz**
- **Think:** Why is the Rand reading a moral defense of capitalism? What vision of society is behind Rand's ethics? Friedman offers pragmatic arguments for capitalism. How convincing is his depiction of markets? Of society as a whole?

SEPTEMBER 19 THE MARKET: HOW IT ACTUALLY WORKS

- Finish discussion of Rand And Friedman, if necessary
- W/R, Chapter 4
- **DO:** Rank the market failures described by Wright and Rogers from most to least important for understanding the current conditions of capitalist markets in the United States. Bring this to class.

SEPTEMBER 21 THE ENVIRONMENT

- W/R, Chapter 5
- **Watch:** Two public service announcements. What is your reaction to these videos? How effective do you think public education campaigns like this can be in addressing environmental problems today?

SEPTEMBER 26 TRANSPORTATION

- W/R, Chapter 6
- **Watch:** The Price of Gas
- **Watch:** Judge Doom's Highway Proposal
- **Quiz**
- **Think:** What are the pro's and con's of subsidized gas? Should we eliminate those subsidies and pay the "true market price" for gasoline? What does it mean to realize the value of efficiency in this case?
- **Do:** What are the most important objectives to achieve when making choices about transportation infrastructure (from a planning point of view)? Come up with 2-3 bullets, ranked from most important to least and bring them to class.

SEPTEMBER 28 CONSUMERISM

- W/R, Chapter 7
- Twitchell – "Two Cheers for Materialism"
- **Watch:** "Hungry Planet"
- **Think:** If there are so many problems with consumerism, as argued by Wright and Rogers, why do people engage in it? Why do people make "bad" decisions?
- **DO:** Who is right, the "academic scolds" Wright and Rogers or Twitchell and his embrace of materialism? Take a side in this debate. Write 2-3 bullet points to support your position and bring them to class.

OCTOBER 3 HEALTH CARE

- W/R, Chapter 8
- Steven Brill, "Hate Obamacare, Love Obamacare"
- **Watch** "ACA and AHCA Compared"
- **Quiz**
- **Think:** Why is American health care so complicated? What are the main obstacles to reform? Do you support "Obama-care"? Why or why not? What would be better?

OCTOBER 5 FINANCE

- W/R: Chapter 9
- **Watch:** video on the credit crisis and the Great Recession
- **Quiz**
- **Impossible Argument Due**

OCTOBER 10 HIGH ROAD CAPITALISM

- W/R, Chapter 10
- Optional: “Building a High Road Agenda: Examples from Wisconsin” (read pages: 1-6, 16-33). *The point of this reading is to describe efforts to implement the more abstract discussion of high road capitalism found in the Wright and Rogers text. The key questions have to do with feasibility: is it really possible to build a high road economy? What are the real obstacles? Use this reading to reflect on the claims made in the W/R text.*
- **Think:** Key argument of this chapter is that the lack of affirmative state has put the economy on the low road.
 - What does this mean?
 - Do you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
 - What aspects of the high-road capitalism proposal are most plausible? Which is least plausible? What would it take to shift the US economy to be more high-road than low-road?

NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 12

MIDTERM #1 COVERS ONLY PART I

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12 AT 8AM AND CLOSES MONDAY, OCTOBER 16 AT MIDNIGHT

PART II. INEQUALITY

OCTOBER 17 THINKING ABOUT FAIRNESS

- W/R, Chapter 11
- Hochschild – “Strangers in their Own Land.” Chapter 9**
- **Think:** How does Hochschild's account resonate with your understanding of the rise of the Tea Party/MAGA? How does this "deep story" speak to the value of fairness? What does this account imply for you about the possibility of reducing the polarization of politics?

** The PDF includes chapter 1, which describes the motivation, methods, and field site for the study. It is not required but may provide helpful background information on Hochschild and her study.

OCTOBER 19 CLASS INEQUALITY

- W/R, Chapter 12
- Lareau: “Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life”

- **Think:** Reflect on how you navigate institutions like UW-Madison. Do you do so with a sense of entitlement or deference? Why do you think that is? What does the Lareau reading tell us about social class and about the relationship between class and social institutions?

OCTOBER 24 PERSISTENT POVERTY

- W/R, Chapter 13
- **Watch** video on class mobility
- **Impossible Argument Part II Due**

OCTOBER 26 ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- W/R, Chapter 14
- “Guaranteed Income’s Moment in the Sun”
- **Watch:** CNBC Report on Basic Income
- **Quiz**

OCTOBER 31 RACIAL INEQUALITY

- W/R, Chapter 15
- **Quiz**

NOVEMBER 2 RACIAL INEQUALITY, CONTINUED

- Kramer et al. – Black Lives and Police Tactics Matter
- De Bruin – Trends in Militarized policing
- Fields – Police Need Liability Insurance
- North - How racist policing took over American cities, explained by a historian.
- **Explore:** <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/cities>
- **Think:** What surprised you or, if nothing surprised you, what was reinforced? Do the policy reform proposals (body cameras and liability insurance) seem like viable solutions? In light of the readings, what do you think about calls to defund police (and what does that mean)?

NOVEMBER 7 GENDER INEQUALITY

- Position paper due
- W/R, Chapter 16
- **Watch:** [Gender Socialization video](#)

NOVEMBER 9 GENDER INEQUALITY, CONTINUED

- Charles - "What Gender is Science?"
- Wade - "What's so Cultural about Hookup Culture?"
- Hochschild - "Second Shift"
- **Quiz**

NO CLASS NOVEMBER 14

MIDTERM #2 COVERS ONLY PART II

OPENS FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10 (12PM) AND CLOSSES TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14 (NOON)

PART III. DEMOCRACY

NOVEMBER 16 CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY: HOW IT WORKS

- W/R, Chapter 17
- Putnam – “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”

NOVEMBER 21 VOTING, PARTIES, ELECTORAL RULES, CAMPAIGN FINANCE

- W/R, CHAPTER 18
- [Washington Post Op-ed on gerrymandering in Wisconsin](#)

*****THANKSGIVING BREAK *****

NOVEMBER 28 DEMOCRACY AND TAXATION

- W/R, Chapter 19
- **Quiz**

NOVEMBER 30 DEMOCRACY AND CORPORATE MEDIA

- **Annotated Bibliography due**
- W/R, Chapter 20
- **Watch:** “Jon Stewart Interviews Jim Cramer” (3 parts)
- **Think:** What is the role of the press that informs Stewart's questioning? Is the mass media partly to blame for the Great Recession? What are the appropriate responsibilities of media, including social media, for ensuring a robust system of democratic deliberation?

DECEMBER 5 MILITARISM & EMPIRE

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

DECEMBER 7 UNIONS AND DEMOCRACY

- W/R, Chapter 22
- **Watch:** Madison’s Union Cab
- **Quiz**

DECEMBER 9 DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW

- W/R, Chapter 23
- **Watch:** “Chicago Participatory Budgeting,” update on “Dudley Street initiative”

DECEMBER 12 CONCLUSION

- Final paper due in Canvas
- W/R, Chapter 24

FINAL EXAM COVERS ONLY PART III

Exam opens Friday, December 15 at 2:25 pm and closes Monday, December 18 at 2:25 pm

OTHER COURSE BUSINESS

Departmental 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.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform me of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I will work either directly with the you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA. (See: [McBurney Disability Resource Center](#))

Religious Observances 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](https://kb.wisc.edu/page.php?id=21698) for details: <https://kb.wisc.edu/page.php?id=21698>

Exam Proctoring. Instructors have the authority to decide whether to proctor their tests, quizzes or other course assessments whether the courses is offered in-person or remotely. Failure to use the proctoring service assigned will result in a zero on the exam/assignment.

Academic Integrity By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion. 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](https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/): <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/>. If you have questions about the rules for any of the assignments or exams, please ask your instructor.

Academic Integrity and Artificial Intelligence. This technology is very new and likely to be very disruptive in the academic context. Ethical use rules are still in progress, and the university has not yet recommended best practices for purposes of instruction.

Text-generative AI, such as ChatGPT are trained on large sets of text data to respond to questions in natural language. The algorithm does not “know” anything and cannot evaluate the meaning of the text it generates. When given a prompt, it predicts the next most likely word, given the pattern of words found in the dataset. Such models cannot accurately attribute sources.

Relying on text-generative AI for class assignments creates the risk of violating a core tenet of academic integrity. The first example of academic misconduct provided by the [UW-Madison Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards](#) is: “Claiming credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation.” AI trained on large language models makes it impossible to attribute underlying sources accurately.

This is not to say that there are no educationally relevant and acceptable uses of text-generative AI, but exact standards for educationally appropriate use remain a work in progress. It may be helpful for brainstorming ideas, editing your writing, summarizing the writing of others, or other things.

The key idea to guide your use of AI is this: if your use of AI displaces the intellectual work of formulating ideas and supplying evidence, then you are short cutting the educational processes of learning to think clearly and critically. That is bad. At minimum:

- Do not turn in any assignment that is AI's direct, un-revised product. If all you do is submit the assignment prompt to a text-generative AI bot and then submit the response as your own writing, you are in jeopardy of violating academic integrity.
- If you choose to use AI for summarizing, be prepared to rewrite the AI output in your own words.
- *If you use AI in any fashion*, you must provide a note (footnote or endnote) in your assignment indicating that you have done so, providing a link to the bot, and the exact prompts you relied on.

All assignments will be turned in through Canvas. Canvas has built-in screens for plagiarism and non-human text, providing metrics of AI-generated content at the document and sentence levels. I am aware of the risk of false positives and will treat such metrics as advisory.

Course evaluations Students will be provided with an opportunity to evaluate this course and their learning experience. Student participation is integral to this course; your feedback is important to me. I strongly encourage you to participate in the course evaluation.

UW-Madison now uses an online course evaluation survey tool, [AEFIS](#). In most instances, you will receive an official email two weeks prior to the end of the semester when your course evaluation is available. You will receive a link to log into the course evaluation with your NetID where you can complete the evaluation and submit it, anonymously. Your participation is an integral component of this course, and your feedback is important to me. I strongly encourage you to participate in the course evaluation.

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 of the Department of Sociology, 8128 Social Science (socchair@ssc.wisc.edu)

Intellectual Property. Lecture materials and recordings for Sociology 125 are protected intellectual property at UW-Madison. Students in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in this class. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, you are not authorized to record my lectures without my permission unless you are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability requiring accommodation. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or share lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities. Students are also prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor's express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitute copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university's policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct.