

SOCIOLOGY 125

**AMERICAN SOCIETY:
how it really works**

Professor Erik Olin Wright

Spring 2017

Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursday, 11:00-12:15

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Office Hours:

Tuesdays 1:00-2:00 and Thursdays 9:30-10:30

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 in its politics.

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 five key values that most Americans believe our society should realize:

1. *Freedom*: the idea, commonly thought to be the most essential to the “American creed,” that people should be able to live their lives, to the greatest degree possible, as they wish. This means people should be free from coercive restrictions imposed by others and, as much as possible, have the capacity to put their life plans into effect.
2. *Prosperity*: the idea that an economy should generate a high standard of living for most people, not just a small privileged elite.
3. *Economic efficiency*: the idea that the economy should generate rational outcomes, effectively balancing costs and benefits in the way resources are used.
4. *Fairness*: the idea that people should be treated justly and that they should have equal opportunity to make something of their lives without unfair privileges and unfair disadvantages.
5. *Democracy*: the idea that our public decisions should reflect the collective will of equal citizens, not of powerful and privileged elites.

A central theme throughout the course will be: *To what degree does contemporary American society realize these values, and how might it do a better job?*

READINGS, REQUIREMENTS, AND GRADING

Students are expected to show up for every class, do the readings, and participate actively in discussions in the weekly discussion sections. If you have a problem of *any* kind with attendance, let your TA know what’s up.

Readings

There is one required book for the course: *American Society: how it really works*, by Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (W.W. Norton, 2010). Joel Rogers and I wrote this book on the basis of the themes and ideas we have developed in this course over the past twenty-five years. In the past we were never very happy with the readings we used in the course – they never seemed to exactly cover the material in the lectures – so we decided to write a book specifically designed for this course. Each chapter in the book corresponds to one or two lectures in the course. There

are no other assigned readings, so you should have plenty of time to read these chapters very carefully. In 2015 we prepared a revised edition of the book which updates all of the tables and graphs and adds some new material, particularly a new chapter on Finance.

I very strongly urge students to read the chapter assigned for a given lecture **BEFORE** the lecture and then reread the chapter after the lecture. In the lectures I will go over the core ideas in each chapter, but you will be in a better position to understand the themes and issues if you have read the chapter first.

Discussion Sections

Many of the topics in this class will be very challenging and the ideas controversial, so it is important that students have an opportunity to discuss the issues. While there will be some opportunity for discussion during the twice-weekly lectures, the size of the class makes it impossible for there to be intensive participation. This is why the course is organized with weekly discussion sections led by graduate teaching assistants. All students in the class are required to participate in a weekly discussion section. The Teaching Assistants that lead these sections are excellent and will be available to help you with any problems you have in the class.

Exams

There will be 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 questions. They are NOT designed to test for creativity in answers. Their purpose is only to test your mastery of the material covered. The final will mainly focus on topics since the second midterm, but there will be some questions covering the earlier topics of the course.

The dates for the exams are:

Midterm #1	Thursday, February 23
Midterm #2	Tuesday, April 4
Final	Thursday, May 11, 10:05 a.m.

Grading

Grades for the course will be based on 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 30 percent; and participation in sections for 20 percent.

LECTURE SCEDHULE FOR SOCIOLOGY 125

		Reading: Chapter from <i>American Society</i>	TOPIC
1	1/17	1	Prologue: Perspectives and Values
2	1/19	2	What kind of a country is this?
Part I. CAPITALISM			
3	1/24	3	The market: how it is supposed to work
4	1/26	4	The market: How it actually works
5	1/31	4	The market: How it actually works
6	2/2	5	The environment
7	2/7	6	Transportation
8	2/9	7	Consumerism
9	2/14	8	Health Care
10	2/16	9	Finance
11	2/21	10	High Road Capitalism
	2/23		Midterm #1
Part II. INEQUALITY			
12	2/28	11	Thinking about Fairness and Inequality
13	3/2	12	Class
14	3/7	13	Persistent poverty and Rising Inequality
15	3/9	14	Ending Poverty in America
16	3/14	15	Racial Inequality
17	3/16	15	Racial Inequality, continued
18	3/28	16	Gender inequality
19	3/30	16	Gender inequality, continued
	4/4		Midterm #2
Part III. DEMOCRACY			
20	4/6	17	Democracy: how it works
21	4/11	17	Democracy: how it works, continued
22	4/13	18	Elections and voting
23	4/18	19	Taxation and the Attack on the Affirmative State
24	4/20	20	Corporate Control of the Media
25	4/25	21	Militarism and Empire
26	4/27	22	Labor Unions
27	5/2	23	Democracy from below
28	5/4	24	Possible Futures
May 11, 10:05 a.m.			Final Examination

Additional Information

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 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.