

Sociology 3054
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY
Spring 2022

Instructor: Jeffrey Weng
Class time: Fridays 10:20 a.m. to 1:10 p.m.
Location: Sociology & Social Work Building 203

Office hours: By appointment
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COURSE SUMMARY

There is no shortage of confusion about the state of American society today. Political polarization, climate change crises, racial tensions, gender controversies—not to mention the pandemic—all compete for space in newsfeeds and for our attention. It seems nearly impossible to separate what is important from what is not. This course attempts to do this seemingly impossible task. Looking beyond the headlines, this course seeks to uncover the larger themes of American society. The first part of the course introduces American society, the political system, and the foundational texts that every American schoolchild encounters. Part 2 of the course examines America's global position, comparing the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the current situation. Finally, the third part of the course covers the major sociological concepts of race, class, and gender in contemporary American society.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Class Participation (20%)

Each student's participation in asking questions and contributing to discussions is encouraged and expected. This course does not have the traditional midterm and final exams, and so participation is a key part of the grade. Attendance is mandatory and will be tracked for every class. Each student is allowed an absence from one class, no questions asked. Any absence beyond the first will result in a deduction of 2% from the student's final grade.

Reading Group Presentations and Reading Responses (50%)

The core activity of this course will be each student's participation in and contribution to a reading group. I have selected seven recently published books discussing different aspects of American society. In the second week of class, students will be randomly assigned to one group (of seven or eight members) for each book. Each group is responsible for creating a group presentation on the book that they will give in class on the designated week for the book. For each presentation, students will not only describe the book's contents, but also collect additional information from relevant sources to share with the class. Presentations will constitute 20% of each student's final grade.

In addition to class presentations, students will also write two reading responses. Each reading response should be about 1,000 words long. The first should be about the student's own group's book. The second should be another group's book of the student's own choosing. Each reading response should only very briefly summarize the main ideas of the book; students should add their own analysis and thoughts as well. The two responses will make up 30% of each student's final grade.

Short Papers and Presentations on Each of the Fifty States (30%)

The other major activity of the course will be for each student to become familiar with one of the fifty states (or, depending on enrollment, possibly one of the five territories) of the US. In week 3, each student will be randomly assigned to a state or territory. Thereafter, I will provide a simple research question at the beginning of each week. Based on this question, each student will collect information about their own state or territory and then write an informative paragraph of about 300 to 500 words. This will enable students to participate in each class's discussion. These paragraphs will not be checked weekly, but they are important for each student to prepare for the final presentation. There will also be a chance in the middle of the term for me to check that each student is on the right track and for me to give some feedback. At the end of the term, each student will turn in their collected paragraphs. These will constitute 15% of the final grade.

In the last two weeks of the class, each student will prepare a short, five-minute presentation to share their findings about their state or territory with the class. Each student is expected to present on one or more aspects of their state or territory that is of interest to them. Students are also expected to prepare a short and easy-to-understand PowerPoint to accompany their presentation. This presentation will constitute 15% of the final grade.

EXPECTATIONS

- All assignments and participation need to be in English. Late assignments will have 20% of their grade deducted for each day they are late.
- Students are welcome to email me to schedule a time to meet and chat. I am happy to discuss academic interests, career questions, and even graduate school.
- Students are welcome to email me questions. Please remember good email etiquette: identify yourself and the course you're taking. Please clearly state your question. Please clearly sign your name. I strive to respond to emails from 9am to 5pm on weekdays, but I cannot always respond to emergency, last-minute questions, so please think ahead when you have a question.
- If you need to arrive late to class or leave early, please be courteous and let me know. Please also be mindful of your peers and try not to disrupt class as you enter and exit.

CLASS SCHEDULE

PART 1: INTRODUCING AMERICA

Week 1 (2/18) Introduction (online)

Week 2 (2/25) What kind of society is America? (first in-person class)

Week 3 (3/4) American Classics

The Declaration of Independence (1776)

The Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights (1789)

The Gettysburg Address (1863)

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I have a dream" (1963)

de Tocqueville, Alexis. (1835/1840) 2000. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Selections.)

PART 2: AMERICA'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

Week 4 (3/11) America Triumphant: Politics and Society in the 1990s

Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16: 3–18.

Huntington, Samuel. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22–49.

Friedman, Thomas L. 1996. "Big Mac I." *The New York Times*, December 8, 1996, sec. Opinion.

Friedman, Thomas L. 1996. "Big Mac II." *The New York Times*, December 11, 1996, sec. Opinion.

Week 5 (3/18) America in Decline? (book club presentation)

Osno, Evan. 2021. *Wildland: The Making of America's Fury*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Week 6 (3/25) No class (away at a conference)

Week 7 (4/1) Spring break / Tomb-Sweeping Day long weekend (no class)

PART 3: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN AMERICA

Week 8 (4/8) Race (part 1): Criminal Justice (book club presentation)

Kuo, Michelle. 2017. *Reading with Patrick: A Teacher, a Student, and a Life-Changing Friendship*. New York: Random House.

Week 9 (4/15) Race (part 2): The History Wars (book club presentation)

The New York Times Magazine. 2019. "The 1619 Project," August 14, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

Week 10 (4/22) Class: American Meritocracy? (book club presentation)

Sandel, Michael J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Week 11 (4/29) Gender (part 1) (book club presentation)

Ansari, Aziz, and Eric Klinenberg. 2015. *Modern Romance: An Investigation*. New York: Penguin Books.

Week 12 (5/6) Gender (part 2) (book club presentation)

Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Week 13 (5/13) Asian Americans (book club presentation)

Kang, Jay Caspian. 2021. *The Loneliest Americans*. New York: Crown.

Week 14 (5/20) Final presentations

Week 15 (5/27) Final presentations