

**SOCIOLOGY 105:
INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Spring 2008**

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Class Meetings: MWF 9-9:50
Class Location: 2309 Art-Sociology
Office Hours: Monday 11-12pm or by
appointment

Course Description

This course will take a critical approach to understanding the nature and consequences of contemporary social problems in the United States. We will examine structural, racial, economic, and gendered aspects of particular social problems; such as those related to health, education and work. Many of the topics covered are interconnected, thus you will find that throughout the semester we will return to themes or concepts already discussed though from a different point of view.

Much of the material presented in this class will challenge the values and beliefs you have acquired throughout your lifetime. Given that we are using a critical sociological lens to examine social problems, this requires that you look at society from a vantage point other than the one you use everyday. Whether you ultimately change your beliefs or they remain the same, I hope this course encourages you to reflect upon why you believe what you believe, helps you to understand the implications of those beliefs and helps you to compare your perspectives with those of others and sociological research. We shall also cover the ways in which individuals and groups respond to social problems and encourage you to think of possible solutions.

Course Objectives

1. Understand how sociologists define social problems.
2. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of competing explanations of social problems.
3. Understand how sociologists research social problems.
4. Become familiar with the prevalence of major contemporary social problems.
5. Understand the consequences of social problems.
6. Analyze major contemporary social problems in class discussions, readings and writing assignments.
7. Think of possible alternatives to address social problems.
8. Learn to use the writing and research resources available to you on campus and to use these resources to write a critical paper.

Required Texts

Neubeck, Kenneth J., Mary Alice Neubeck, and Davita Silfen Glasberg. 2007. *Social Problems: A Critical Fifth Edition*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Companies. ISBN-13: 978-0-07-296804-0

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. 2006. *Racism Without Racists: Color Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the US*, Second Edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

Additional Required Readings can be found on blackboard.

Course Expectations

1. *Class Etiquette:* This class begins promptly at 9:00 am. To avoid class disruptions please arrive on time and come ready to take notes, participate in class activities, and listen to lecture. Since one of the objectives of this course is to expose you to different perspectives of understanding social problems, primarily from a structural rather than from an individual perspective, some discussions will be very controversial. While you might disagree with information presented in the readings, with your

classmates or with me, I ask that you remain respectful and open-minded and elect to use evidence and logic to support your views.

2. *Class Format:* I will use a combination of lecture, discussion and class exercises to teach this course. This format requires that you actively participate. In some class sessions I will ask you to meet in small groups to discuss a particular concept or topic.
3. *Films:* During the course of the semester we will watch several films. You are expected to participate in discussion regarding the content of the films. I will also include questions about the films on the exams.
4. *Religious Observances:* Students will not be penalized for attendance, or in any other way, due to participation in religious observances. If you need to miss classes due to religious observance please provide me with a note of the dates that you will be absent no later than the end of the second week of class.
5. *Disability Services:* The University of Maryland is legally required to provide the necessary facilities, services and programs to student with documented disabilities. If you are a student with a documented disability and need accommodations to attend, participate or complete any course requirement, please register with the Office of Disability Support Service, 0126 Shoemaker Hall, and provide me with the required forms at the beginning of the semester. For more information please visit their website, <http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/>.
6. *Honor Code:* You are required to follow the Code of Academic Integrity set in place by the University of Maryland Student Honor Council. The standards of this code hold you accountable for:
 - a. Cheating: intentional use of unauthorized information to aid you in class assignment or exam.
 - b. Fabrication: intentionally falsifying or inventing citations or other information.
 - c. Facilitating Academic Dishonesty: Knowingly assisting another student to engage in cheating, fabrication, or plagiarism.
 - d. Plagiarism: Knowingly using someone else's words as one's own without correct citation methods.

For more information visit <http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html>

Grading and Assignments

Grading Component	Percentage of Grade	Date
Attendance & Class Participation	10	
Critical Discussion Questions	15	Every assigned reading (beginning Feb 11 th)
Reflection Assignment	10	Posted below
Exam 1	20	March 31
Exam 2	20	April 28
Final Project (Class Zines)	25	May 19

Attendance and Class Participation:

Attendance to class is required. You are expected to be in class for lecture and be prepared to participate in class discussions. Your participation in this class is expected and is an important aspect of the class. As a component of the learning process, it is your responsibility to read assignments, attend class, ask questions, think critically and discuss your ideas with the class.

Critical Discussion Questions:

Beginning February 11th, I will post an assignment on blackboard indicating that you write two (2) critical discussion questions for each assigned reading. Your questions should be posted before 8pm

the night before class. All questions that are not entered before 8pm will not receive credit for this assignment. This assignment will disappear after 8pm.

To ensure that you put some thought into writing the questions, I will grade your questions on a two point scale.

- 2 points for questions that address the readings and could be used to engage critical discussion about the topic or a concept in the reading.
- 1 point for questions that address the readings but are too descriptive (a definition question) or would lead to yes no answers in class discussion.
- 0 point if your questions do not address the reading, or your questions are too vague (meaning they address the topic/issue but do not point to anything specific in the reading) or you did not enter your questions on blackboard.

Reflection Assignment:

To help you process the major concepts, themes, and issues discussed in class you are asked to provide a piece of work that showcases your reaction and thoughts to a particular issue or topic. There are **3** reflection assignments listed in the course outline (pages 5-6). You are to choose **1** of the **3** reflection assignments. The reflection assignment require that you write a **3 page** paper that engages issues related to gender, heterosexuality or race in America. Your essay should:

- Clearly and directly address one of more key important concepts/themes cover in that week's reading.
- Discuss how you understood that social problem/phenomenon before and after its introduction in class
- Address any social implication/consequence that emerges from this social problem. In other words, express in your own words what social harm that the social issue (dominant gender ideologies/practices, heterosexuality or the new racism) poses for different members of society.

Final Project (Class Zine):

You are probably wondering, "What is a Zine"? A Zine is similar to a magazine; however, it is more like a class book or "do it yourself publication" written and designed by members of a class or other group. Our Class Zines will address a local, national, or global social issue that you and your group members consider important for others to learn about and engage in order to promote social change. Thus, you will be assigned to a group of **3 people**, where you will decide on:

- An issue of interest (such as binge drink, crime, globalization etc.)
- The responsibilities of each group member (the design, format, editor etc.).
- And, a place and time to meet outside of class.

Your final grade will be based on your individual and overall contribution to the Zine. For the individual component of the Zine,

- Each group member will write a **5 page paper** that engages a different aspect of the social issue that your group selected.
- Each paper must include references that you obtain from the library. You are limited one Internet reference.

The overall component of your grade will include the general composition, cohesiveness, clarity and effectiveness of the Zine in conveying the importance of the issue of choice. To help you do this the group should delegate responsibilities to different group members responsible for:

- Writing an introduction that introduces the issue/topic to their audience (one or two individuals).
- One or two group members should serve as editors for the overall Zine

- One or two designers should be responsible for gathering pictures, poems, puzzles or other creative literature that addresses your issue of choice.
- One or two people should serve as the composers who make copies of each contributing story, essay, picture etc. and bind them together. (I will have instructions and copies of Zines to help you with this process. Please let me know if you need help with copying. We shall also decide in class how many copies each group will be needed to pass around for class presentation).

The Zine your group creates will give you an opportunity to share your insights about an issue to the class as well as people outside of class. Have fun with this project and be creative! We will use some class time to introduce you to your group members, and to get you started. As you go along, I will provide more information and examples to help you with this project.

General Grading Guidelines: What Constitutes an “A,” “B,” or “C” Grade for a Paper:

In order to obtain an “A” or “A-“ in any given written assignment it is not enough to merely complete the stated assignment. Rather your paper must be clear and exhibit superior form and content.

In reference to form, each written assignment should:

- Contain virtually no typographical and grammatical errors;
- Exhibit clarity as well as elegance in flow;
- Provide adequate citations for all quotations;
- And be well organized, with a coherent introduction as well as a conclusion that does more than merely summarize what has already been said.

In reference to content, each written assignment should:

- Indicate that carefully read the assigned texts;
- Show your ability to go beyond ideas covered in class discussion and lecture;
- Demonstrate your capacity to draw connections points that are not obvious directly discussed in the reading;
- And so forth and so on

Some form of “B” will be given to assignments that:

- Indicate a good grasp of the text in question, show that you can develop a coherent argument and display that you have capacity to write decent prose. Such assignments are average in the sense that they do not stand out from the crowd in the way “A” assignments do.
- Some form of “B” will also be given to assignments that are either unusually strong in content, but somewhat weaker in form, or vice versa. Obviously, a “B+” will go to assignments that are better than the majority and that demonstrate at least the potential to be truly excellent.
- A “B-“ will be given to assignments which, although coherently argued and decently composed, do not go much beyond a solid understanding of the text under consideration. Grades in the “B+” to “B-“ range should be read as expressions of my sense that you are doing an acceptable job of engaging the assigned material.

Some form of “C” will go to assignments that I find seriously flawed for one reason or another. I will give you some form of a “C”:

- If the quality of your writing is impeding your ability to express your thoughts clearly;
- If when I complete your assignment, I still cannot identify your central argument;
- If your assignment fails to go beyond a simple summary of the assigned reading;
- If your assignment fails to provide the evidence or support necessary to articulate and defend your basic claims;
- If it appears to jump from topic to topic without rhyme or reason.

Course Outline and Readings

I. Introduction to Social Problems

- January 28 Introduction, Overview of Syllabus & Goals of Course
- January 30 Using the Sociological Imagination to Understand Social Problem
C. Wright Mills. Sociological Imagination **(PDF)** pp. 3-13
- February 1 Sociological Approaches to Understanding Social Problems
Chapter 1: Introduction, pp. 3-18
- February 4-6 Understanding Social Solutions Through Social Movements
McAdam and Snow. 1997. Social Movements: Introduction **(PDF)**
- February 8 Sociology Approaches to Studying Social Problems
Chapter 1: Introduction, pp. 18-25

II. Social Construction of Gender and Sex

- February 11 Nature vs. Nurture Challenging Dominant Notions of Gender
West and Zimmerman. Doing Gender **(PDF)**
- February 13 Gender Trouble
Zinn et al. 2000. Sex and Gender Through a Prism of Difference **(PDF)**
Laura Wackwitz. 2003. Verifying the myth **(PDF)**
- February 15 Kilbourne. 1999. You Talkin' To Me? **(PDF)**
Tough Guise (media clip)
Killing me Softly (media clip)

III. Heterosexism

- February 18 Heterosexism and Theories of Homosexuality
Chapter 9: Heterosexism, pp.269-281
Reflection Assignment on Gender & Sex Due!!!
- February 20 Myths & Stereotypes about Gay People
Chapter 9: Heterosexism, pp. 281-295
- February 22 Moraga 1983. La Guera **(PDF)**
Media clip on homophobia

IV. Race in America: New Formation of Race in Colorblind Racism

- February 25 Bonilla-Silva. 2006. Racism Without Racist: Chapter 1 &2
Reflection Assignment on Heterosexism Due!!!

- February 27 Bonilla-Silva. 2006. Racism Without Racist: Chapter 6 &7
- February 29 Chapter 7: Racism, pp. 197-209
 Bonilla-Silva. 2006. Racism Without Racist: Chapter 8

V. Poverty: Understanding the General Misconceptions About the Poor

- March 3 What is Poverty?
 Chapter 6: Economic Inequality and Poverty, pp. 176-186
Reflection Assignment on Racism Due!!!
- March 5 Langston. 1988. Tired of Playing Monopoly? **(PDF)**
 Class Dismissed (film)
- March 7 Wealth and Health
 Scott. Life at the Top in America Isn't Just Better, It's Longer. **(PDF)**

VI. The United States Health and Health Care System

- March 10 Race, Class, Gender and Health Status of Americans
 Chapter 13: Health Care, pp. 397-408.
- March 12 State of the U.S. Health Care System
 Chapter 13: Health Care, pp. 408-427.
- March 14 Guest Speaker
- March 17-23 **SPRING BREAK!!!**

VII. Education Inequality

- March 24 The Promise of Education
 Chapter 12: Schooling and Unequal Educational Opportunity, pp. 363-375
- March 26 Structure of Schooling Inequality
 Chapter 12: Schooling and Unequal Educational Opportunity, pp. 375-388
- March 28 Jean Aynon. Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of work **(PDF)**
- March 31 **Exam 1**

VIII. Work and the Promise of Class Mobility

- April 2 Nickel and Dimed
 Introduction and Evaluation **(PDF)**
- April 4 Race and Work
 Pager and Western. 2005. Race at Work **(PDF)**

April 7 Gender and Work
 Jacobs. 2003. Detours on the Road to Equality (**PDF**)

IX. Environmental Harm

April 9-11 Personal Contribution to Environmental Abuse
 Commoner, Barry. The Technological Flaw (**PDF**)

April 14 Harm to Environment due to Pollution
 Chapter 5: Nature and Extent of Environmental Abuse, pp. 127-151

April 16 The Cause of Environmental Crisis
 Chapter 5: Searching for Causes and Solutions, pp. 152-158

April 18 Too Hot Not to Handle (film)

X. Perspectives of the Power Structure in U.S. Society

April 21 Views of Political Power
 Chapter 2: Concentration of Political and Economic Power, pp. 31-43

April 23 Structuralist Perspective of Power, Political Influence and Democratic Ideal
 Chapter 2: Concentration of Political and Economic Power, pp. 43-57

April 25 Democracy and Knowledge
 Rich media, Poor Democracy (film)

April 28 **Exam 2**

April 30 **Zine Presentations**

May 2 **Zine Presentations**

May 5 **Zine Presentations**

May 7 **Zine Presentations**

May 9 **Zine Presentations**

Final Zine Project: Due Monday, May 19th 10:00 am

**The instructor reserves the right to alter the syllabus and structure of this course when she sees fit.
**No Extra Credit!!!