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**Sociology 103: American Life**



(Statue of Liberty replica on Route 13 in DE)

**Course Description**

This course introduces students to the study of American culture by drawing from a sociology of culture framework. Cultural sociology studies how social structure and culture mutually influence one another--how symbols, discourse, meaning, and cultural practices inform one another. Drawing on Griswold's concept of “the cultural diamond,” students will investigate the connections among four aspects of culture: *cultural objects* (symbols, beliefs, values, and practices), *cultural creators* (organizations and systems that produce and distribute cultural objects), *cultural receivers* (the people who experience culture and cultural objects), and *the social world*, the context in which culture is created and experienced).

Through examining primary texts ranging from historical works to film, students will explore elements that define contemporary American culture and its historical development. While focusing on common ideas about what American culture means, we will also investigate the diversity of experiences that groups and individuals have had in American culture. Note that the course is not a comprehensive survey of the American experience. Instead, we will study core ideas and experiences that reflect a sociological dialogue about American society and culture. Topics include: nationalism and civil religion, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, culture and consumerism, social and economic class, and media culture.

The course has two broad goals:

* To explore the complexities and contradictions underlying American culture, studying how (or if) disparate Americans have shaped a shared American identity and culture; and
* To discover how different concepts of identity (individual, community, cultural, and national) are formed.

With these objectives as a foundation, students will be encouraged to think critically about the ideas and experiences that influenced the evolution of American culture. Primary focus will be on close textual readings, critical thinking, class discussion, and cultural analysis. The course seeks to answer questions such as: How do sociologists conceptualize and explain culture? and How do sociological theories help us to understand different perspectives of American culture? By applying sociological theories of culture to texts, students will become enabled to interpret the context of the messages, meanings, experiences, and ideas of American culture.

**PLAS Requirements**

This course satisfies three PLAS requirements. It fulfills the Culture and Values (CV) Area of Knowledge because we examine how social forces influence American culture and the role that culture plays in exerting or resisting regimes of dominance. The course also fulfills the United States (US) Context of Experience requirement because it focuses on American culture and values.

**Course Requirements**

Please carefully read the entire syllabus by the first week of class to ensure that you fully understand what is required of you in this course. The course requirements include:

* Regular class attendance
* Discussion of weekly readings
* Active participation in all classes
* Group Presentation
* Research Essay
* Completion of Mid-Term Examination
* Completion of Final Examination

**Research Essay**

This paper offers students the opportunity to delve into a topic addressed in class or a research area that has been introduced in the readings but has not been discussed in the course. You may also choose your own topic.Please consult with me about your paper so that I may offer suggestions and guidance. The paper should be between 6-8 pages (excluding the bibliography); it should also follow the standards of academic writing (either MLA or APA).

**Group Presentation**

Each class period, a group of students will be assigned to introduce key themes of the readings and a cultural artifact that reflects the topic. The artifact can be anything that you believe represents the particular concept. Cultural artifact include media articles and images as well as selections from works such as books, music, and film. For example, when discussing the social construction of sexual identity, a children’s book that reinforces dominant perceptions of male and female roles would be an important tool for discussion. As another example, an excerpt from a Presidential Inaugural speech could be used to discuss the components of American civil religion.

**Grading**

The course is designed to sharpen your skills as a social scientist. Therefore, all assignments must reflect professional standards of analysis, presentation, writing and timeliness. As in professional life, accurate spelling and grammar, and clear and concise writing are critical. To further simulate the professional world, emailed assignments will not be accepted. All assignments are due at the beginning of class. Late assignments will be reduced one letter per class session (In other words, if an assignment is late, grading will begin at a “B” level). Each assignment builds on one another. Submitting late assignments will increase the difficulty of subsequent assignments.

An *incomplete* for the course will be granted only in highly unusual situations and only with a prior written request from you, written approval from me and your advisor, and a written schedule of deadlines indicating when the course requirements will be met. Any deviation from these arrangements for grades of “incomplete” may result in a final failing grade for the course.

The final grade for this course consists of:

Class Participation (including any in-class activities) 10%

Group Presentation 20%

Research Essay 20%

Midterm 25%

Final Exam 25%

**Required Texts**

*Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* by Wendy Griswold (3rd Edition)

*Readings for Sociology* edited by Garth Massey (Sixth Edition)

Additional Readings to be distributed in class

**Note on Professionalism**

Please respect the following policies:

**Plagiarism and Academic Integrity:**

You are expected to abide by the University’s policies regarding plagiarism and academic integrity. Violating these policies bears serious consequences. Please be certain that you understand proper citation standards. If you are uncertain, please consult a research guide and/or style manual (such as *The Modern Researcher* or *The APA Style Manual*). You may also talk with me.

**Attendance and Punctuality:**

Your regular attendance at class meetings is necessary for doing well in this course. Frequent absences will count against your grade. Class will begin and end promptly. Therefore, frequent late arrivals or chronic early departures will also count against your grade.

If you are going to miss a class (or need to arrive late or leave early), please let me know ahead of time. Students who arrive late or leave early disrupt the class and miss important information.

**Cell Phones:**

Please turn off all cell phones before entering the class. If you are in an emergency situation or are expecting a truly urgent communication, please turn off any sounds or audible signals your device may emit during use, turn your ringer down low, or use a vibrating signal if your device has one, and be sure to sit near a door and exit quietly to take a call or respond to a message. Please do not send text messages during class. Texting is disruptive to the classroom. It distracts your fellow students and your professor!

**Submission of Assignments:**

Please note that I will not accept any assignments via email. All assignments must be submitted directly to me. All assignments are due at the beginning of class. To meet deadlines, be sure to allow yourself ample time to address any printing or computer problems.

**Course Schedule**

**Week 1 : Course Introduction: What is Culture?**

Course Introduction

Griswold: Chapter 1 “Culture and the Cultural Diamond”

Williams, Ray. 1976. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. New York: Oxford U. Press. Pp. 76-82.

**Week 2: The United States: What is America**?

America as a Political Idea and Our Reality

US Demographics: How We Live Now

Film: *Pleasantville* Excerpt

Tocqueville: *Democracy in America* Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2)

U.S. Constitution Excerpt (The Bill of Rights)

**Week 3: Cultural Meaning and Nationalism**

Overview of Culture and Meaning in Sociological Thought

(Marx, Functionalism, and Weber)

American Civil Religion

Griswold: Chapter 2 “Cultural Meaning

Bellah, R. “Civil Religion in America”

**Week 4 and 5: Culture as a Social Creation and Religion in America**

Religion as a Social Bond (Durkheim)

Distribution of Religions in the U.S.

30 Days Episode (Muslims in America)

Griswold: Chapter 3 “Culture as a Social Interaction”

Massey:

Montemurro, B. “Deviance and Liminality”

Ferna, E. W. and R. A. Ferna “A Look Behind the Veil”

Bellah et al. “Religious Community and American Individualism”

Hosteler, J. “Amish Society”

**Weeks 6 and 7: Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.**

Social Interaction and Identity

Construction a Collective Identity

*Eyes on the Prize* Excerpt

30 Days Episode (Border Guard)

Griswold: Chapter 5 “Identities, Problems, and Movements”

Massey:

Walton, A. “My Secret Life as a Black Man”

Ardizzone, H. and E. Lewis. “Love and Race Caught in the Public Eye”

Rodriguez. “Go North, Young Man”

Waters, M.C. “Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only”

***Week 8: Take Home MIDTERM DISTRIBUTED***

**Week 9 and 10: Gender and Sexuality**

Notions of Female and Male Identities

30 Days Episode (Understanding Homosexuality)

Griswold: Chapter 8 “Culture and Power”

Massey:

Messner, M. “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinities”

Bettie, J. “Women without Class: Chicas, Cholas, Trash, and the Presence/Absence of Class Identity”

Hull, K. “Marriage, Culture, and Law”

**Week 11 and 12: Social and Economic Class in America**

Evolution of American Economy

Class in America

30 Days Episode (Living on Minimum Wage)

*New York Times* Series on Class

Massey:

Ehrenrich, B. “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America”

Wilson, W. J. “When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor”

Gans, H. “Uses of the Underclass in America”

**Week 13: Production, Distribution and Reception of Culture: Highbrow and Popular Culture**

The Historical Roots of the Split between Highbrow and Popular Culture in the U.S.

*Who the [Bleep] is Jackson Pollock*?

Griswold: Chapter 4 “Production, Distribution and Reception of Culture”

Peterson, R.A. and R. M. Kern. (1996) “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore.” American Sociological Review 61: 900-907.

**Week 14: Media Culture and Course Conclusion**

Media Revolutions

IT Culture

Griswold: Chapter 7 “Culture and Connection”.

Ellison, N. et al . (2007) “The Benefits of Facebook ‘Friends’: Social Capital and College Students Use of Online Social Networking Sites” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.*

***Final Exam: Date to Be Announced***