Sociology 180c: Comparative Perspectives

on U.S. and European Societies: Culture

Spring 2011

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Lectures: Tuesdays 5:00 – 8:00 pm
Lecture Hall: Room 145, Dwinelle Hall
Office Hours: Thursdays 2:00 – 4:00 pm

Course Description

Is America different from other developed nations? Attempts to answer this question are frequently lumped together under the concept of “American exceptionalism.” Scholars use this term when describing various characteristics – such as individualism, egalitarianism, and religious fervor – that distinguish the United States from its European forebears. The notion of exceptionalism is, of course, not only a descriptive term. It is also an ideology. After all, many versions of the exceptionalism thesis suggest that America is empowered with a special role in world affairs due to its resources, national character, and (even) divine providence. Implied by this view is that America is not only different from the rest of the world but is, in fact, superior. In this class we will critically evaluate a number of versions of American exceptionalism by comparing the United States to its European peers in the domain of culture.

Course Materials

We selected a broad range of articles, book chapters, and opinion pieces for you to read throughout the semester. From time to time, we will supplement these with movie fragment, as well as brief contemporary videos. On average, you will be asked to read 100 pages per week. All the course materials will be available to you online at our bSpace website.
**Course Requirements**

You final grade in this course will be based on your performance on two in-class exams, 10 weekly commentaries, as well as on your participation in class.

**Two In-Class Exams:** There will be two in-class exams in this class. The first one of these will take place on Tuesday, March 6th and it will cover materials in Weeks 1-7. The second exam will be on the last day of class, on Tuesday, April 24th and it will cover materials in Weeks 9-14. In the case of each exam, we will provide you with four or five possible essay questions one week before the exam and, on the day, we will select one of these for you to answer in a closed book setting. You will need to bring your own blue/green exam book with you to these exams. (You can buy small exam books for about 35 cents at the Cal Student Store, 108 Martin Luther King Jr. Student Union #4505; telephone: 510.642.9000). The exams will start at 5 pm exactly in our usual classroom; you will be given one hour to write your essay. These in-class exams will jointly contribute towards 50% of your overall grade (with each exam being worth 25%).

**Weekly Commentaries:** Beginning with the third week of classes, you will be asked to answer a weekly substantive question about the readings. Your commentary should be about a paragraph long. We will not give you feedback on these commentaries, but we will grade them on the basis of effort (not correctness). In order to earn full points on these, you will need to demonstrate that you have completed the readings for the week and that you have thought about the issues at stake. There will be ten (10) such commentaries during the semester; each will be worth 3 points (or 3% of your total grade).

The purpose of this assignment is to make sure that you read the required materials before coming to class. As a result, commentaries are going to be time-sensitive. We will post commentary questions on Friday nights in your bSpace “Assignment” folder and ask that you submit your response electronically in the same folder four days later (by noon on Tuesdays). We will not accept late commentaries unless (1) you have a doctor’s notice that you were prevented from doing the commentary, or (2) you have secured permission from Szonja (by email) in advance of the submission deadline that a late submission would be accepted. In either case, you will earn only 1 point for you excused commentary instead of the usual 3.

**Class Participation:** This class meets once a week for 3 hours. In terms of its basic format, it will be a mixture of lectures and discussion. We will keep attendance starting in Week 3. This will be monitored through a series of one-minute paragraphs. At some point during the lecture, we will ask you to take out a piece of binding paper, put your name (legibly!) on top, and write down a short answer to a question that relates to our class discussion. We will then collect these responses and use them to assign class participation grades. There will be ten (10) such one-minute paragraphs during the semester, with each counting 2 points (or 2%) towards your overall grade.
We do not give credit for missed attendance unless (1) you have a doctor’s notice that you were prevented from being present, or (2) other valid excuse, for which you informed the instructor in advance of class. (It goes without saying that family/friends visiting you during the lecture, a birthday celebration, or a quick trip to Las Vegas will not be acceptable excuses.) In any case, excused absence will earn you only 1 point for attendance, as opposed to the full 2 points.

**Course Grades:** Your final grade in this class will be based on your performance on the two in-class exams (25% each), your weekly commentaries (30%), and the weekly one-minute papers to monitor class participation (20%). In assigning final grades, we do not “curve” the class. It is, therefore, entirely possible for everyone to get an A. Needless to say, it is also possible (although quite unlikely) for everyone to fail. In assigning final grades, we will use the following basic scheme:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95 – 99%</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>90 – 94%</td>
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<td>B+</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>83 – 86%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80 – 82%</td>
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<td>C+</td>
<td>77 – 79%</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>73 – 76%</td>
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<td>C-</td>
<td>70 – 72%</td>
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<td>D+</td>
<td>67 – 69%</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>60 – 62%</td>
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In this grade-inflated world of ours we are not opposed to the idea of awarding students an A+ for exceptional work. However, in order to earn such a grade, you will have to earn 100 points in this class. There will be no extra credit work assigned in Sociology 121, so your only way to secure these points is to turn in superior work throughout the semester.

**Class Website**

We have set up a bSpace website for the class. You can find here a copy of the syllabus, an electronic version of our class schedule, PDF files for all the readings (under “Resources”), handouts and lecture notes (also under “Resources”), as well as a place for you to submit you weekly commentaries (under “Assignments”). This is also where you will find announcements from us, and your grades. It is essential that you gain access to our class website as soon as possible because (1) all of our required readings reside at our class website and (2) your first assignment is an online assignment and it is due during the third week of classes.

How do you log in to bSpace? Log in to http://bspace.berkeley.edu with your CalNet ID and Passphrase. If you are enrolled through Telebears, you should see a tab at the top of the screen for our course when you log in. If you are enrolled in more than one course using bSpace you will, of course, see a tab for each course. If you are a concurrent enrollment student you cannot be assigned bSpace access until the status of your application is “Approval Completed.” It is your responsibility to make sure that your application is reviewed and approved in a timely fashion. If you have questions about this, please email concurrent@unex.berkeley.edu.
**Course Timeline**

**Tuesday, January 17**  
American Exceptionalism? Introduction and Overview

**Tuesday, January 24**  
Values, Culture and Society

**Tuesday, January 31**  
Individualism and Mass Society. We begin taking class attendance this week. *First commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, February 7**  
Land of Opportunity and the American Dream. *Second commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, February 14**  
Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? *Third commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, February 21**  
Material Well-Being and Mass Consumption. *Fourth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, February 28**  
Practicality, Efficiency, and the Disenchantment of the World. *Fifth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, March 6**  
First In-Class Examination (covering Weeks 1-7)  
*Exam begins at 5 pm in our usual classroom. You will have one hour to complete your work.*

**Tuesday, March 13**  
Religion and Science. *Sixth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, March 20**  
Romantic Love, Family, and Sexuality. *Seventh commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, March 27**  
No Class: Spring Break

**Tuesday, April 3**  
Democracy and Civil Society. *Eighth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday April 10**  
Nationalism, Militarism, and Empire Building. *Ninth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, April 17**  
American Exceptionalism Revisited: Myth or Reality? *Tenth commentary is due by noon.*

**Tuesday, April 24**  
Second In-Class Examination (covering Weeks 9-14)  
*Exam begins at 5 pm in our usual classroom. You will have one hour to complete your work.*
COURSE SCHEDULE AND WEEKLY READINGS

In order to obtain the greatest benefit from our classroom discussions, we strongly encourage you to complete the reading assignments before our class meets and definitely before the in-class exams.

**Week 01: American Exceptionalism? Introduction and Overview**


**Week 02: Values, Culture and Society**


**Week 03: Individualism and Mass Society**


**Week 04:  Land of Opportunity and the American Dream**


Peter Dreier. 2007. “Just the Numbers: The United States in Comparative Perspective.” *Contexts* 6 (Summer): 38-46


**Week 05:  Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?**


Week 06:  Material Well-Being and Mass Consumption


Week 07:  Practicality, Efficiency, and the Disenchantment of the World


Week 08:  First In-Class Examination
Week 09: Religion and Science


Week 10: Romantic Love, Family, and Sexuality


Week 11: No Class – Spring Break

Week 12: Democracy and Civil Society


**Week 13: Nationalism, Militarism, and Empire Building**


**Week 14: American Exceptionalism Revisited: Myth or Reality?**


**Week 15: Second In-Class Examination**