

Sociology 190.4: **AUTOMATION & SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

**CLASS HOURS** Mondays 2pm-4pm  
**LOCATION** Social Sciences Building 420

**INSTRUCTOR** Joseph Klett

**EMAIL** [jklett@berkeley.edu](mailto:jklett@berkeley.edu)

- Read [THIS](#);
- Always include "SOC190.4" in subject line;
- DO NOT contact me through bCourses -- I won't see it.

**OFFICE HOURS** Tuesdays 10am-12pm (over [Zoom](#))  
Wednesdays 1:30pm-3:30pm (in Social Sciences Building 484 or [Zoom](#))

- Please make office hours appointments [HERE](#)

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Automation is an old idea reborn with each new era of technology. Today algorithms, robotics, and machine learning overwhelm the popular discourse about our dawning technological futures. Each story that promises automation will improve our lives seems surrounded by so many more that predict disaster for society.

In this seminar we will use the case of automation to understand the emergence and evolution of *social problems*. We will discuss the foundations of social problem analysis, including social construction, conflict theory, and the work of moral entrepreneurs. Some guiding questions we will consider:

- How do sociologists theorize the emergence and evolution of social problems?
- How do various interested parties such as experts, media figures, politicians, and activists work together and apart to construct social problems, and how do they use language and action to do this work?
- How can we understand complex social problems from multiple perspectives, and across a variety of historical, economic, and cultural contexts?
- How can we use the insights of sociology to develop a critical perspective and advocate for specific changes in society?

We will investigate issues of automation in several areas of sociological interest including labor, finance, education, and ecology. Across these domains of social life, we will discuss automation as an empirical, theoretical, and philosophical concern; this includes questions about what, exactly, is being automated in various social practices, the nature of software versus hardware, and moral narratives about the future.

After an initial introduction to the study of social problems, we will approach automation as a set of claims to the social body – in other words, how automation is organized (read: *organ-ized*) in society, “from the feet up.” Beginning with concerns about movement and circulation in the material world, we will then ascend the social body to machine interventions in manual labor and ritual. We will further consider debates about human appearances as an *interface*, worries about consciousness and the value of biological life, and the effects of rational computations on the human capacity for reason. Finally, we will explore the connection between the heart and the mind, to think about what keeps us human among machines.

#

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS** (% of final grade)

This is not a lecture course. Every student is expected to attend each class meeting, stay for the duration, and contribute to the discussion. Here is how you will be graded:

- A. **Participation** (25%): You will come to EACH class meeting having completed ALL assigned readings and prepared with notes on each reading plus THREE questions for discussion. Each unexcused absence will automatically deduct 2% from your participation grade. You are also required to attend office hours at least once to discuss your research project.
- B. **Discussion leader** (10%): You will work with 1-2 classmates to lead the discussion once in the semester. You are expected to address all numbered readings for the week and provide discussion prompts that invite contrasting viewpoints. You are encouraged to use media and other creative methods to facilitate discussion. You must sign up to lead discussion by Week 3.
- C. **Research proposal** (5%): You will submit a 500-700 word proposal for your final paper topic. You will explain why the topic is interesting to you and what research question you will attempt to answer.
- D. **Outline and literature review** (15%): You will submit a 1500-2000 word outline and literature review for your final paper. This includes a detailed outline of the paper's structure, the issue you will be addressing, your initial argument, and what evidence you will be using. You will also include a summary of the literature you will engage, with a brief explanation of each reading and how you will use them in your paper.
- E. **First draft** (15%): You will submit a 2500-3000 word first draft of your paper.
- F. **Research presentation** (5%): You will make a 10-12 minute presentation to the class based on your research, followed by Q&A.
- G. **Final paper** (25%): You will submit a 4500-6000 word final paper, inclusive of all feedback received on your first draft.

### **ACADEMIC HONESTY**

You are expected to follow the [University guidelines for academic honesty](#). Violations include cheating and plagiarism, as well as self-plagiarism (submitting your own work from a different assignment). Any assignment content composed by a resource other than you, whether human or digital, must be attributed using proper citation. If you have any doubts, please speak to me or your Reader *before* your work is due.

Artificial intelligence (AI) language models, such as ChatGPT, may be used to summarize or contextualize source materials with appropriate citation and thorough editing. Unattributed use of online platforms is considered academic dishonesty and will be treated as such.

### **SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS**

All students should be able to participate in this course. Please address any special needs you may have with me at the beginning of the semester, or when a challenge arises. If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation plan from the Disabled Students' Program (DSP) to me by email, preferably within the first two weeks of the semester. Contact the DSP by phone (510) 642-0518 or by email to [dsp@berkeley.edu](mailto:dsp@berkeley.edu).

## COURSE OUTLINE

All readings should be done prior to the class meeting for which they are assigned. Readings can be found on bCourses under '[Files](#)' unless hyperlinked below.

WEEK 1      **Monday 1/15: NO CLASS**

WEEK 2      **Monday 1/22:** Overview: The social construction of social problems

1. Joel Best. 2017. "The Social Problems Process."
2. Jaron Lanier. 2023. "[There is no AI.](#)"

Plus:

- Cade Metz. 2023. "['The Godfather of A.I.' Leaves Google and Warns of Danger Ahead.](#)"
- David Meyer. 2023. "[Most Americans See AI as an Existential Threat.](#)"
- Matteo Wong. 2023. "[AI Doomerism is a Decoy.](#)"

WEEK 3      **Monday 1/29:** Automating inequality: Moral panics and moral entrepreneurs

1. Joel Best. 2011. "Locating Moral Panics within the Sociology of Social Problems."
2. Virginia Eubanks. 2018. "[The Digital Poorhouse.](#)"
3. Sophie Wang and Taylor Cruz. 2023. [AI for Whose Good?](#)

Plus:

- Zephyr Teachout. 2022. "[The Boss Will See You Now.](#)"
- Pamela Paul. 2023. "[Do Not Panic. It's Just a Moral Panic.](#)"

WEEK 4      **Monday 2/5:** Labored myths I: Alienation, logistics, Taylorism and Luddites

[2:10-2:30, Visit from librarian Ann Glusker]

1. William Faunce. 1965. "Automation and the Division of Labor."
2. David Graeber. 2013. "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs."
3. Aaron Bastani. 2019. "What Is Fully Automated Luxury Communism?" in *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*.

Plus:

- [Bullshit Jobs](#) (2019, *VPRO Backlight*)
- 99% Invisible. 2023. [Blood in the Machine.](#)
- Charlie Warzel. 2023. "[Here's How AI Will Come for Your Job.](#)"

WEEK 5      **Monday 2/12:** Labored myths II: Emotional labor, embodied knowledge and Moravec's paradox

1. Bruno Latour. 2007. "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?"
2. Benjamin Shestakofsky. 2017. "Working Algorithms."
3. Luke Munn. 2022. "Spotty Automation and Less-Than-Human Workers" and "Automation Is Not Our Future" in *Automation is a Myth*.

Plus:

- *The Cleaners* (2018, dir. Moritz Riesebeck and Hans Block)
- Moritz Altenried. 2022. "Workers Leaving the Factory" in *The Digital Factory*.
- James Wright. 2023. "Introduction" in *Robots Won't Save Japan*.
- Jacob Sweet. 2023. "[A Robot's Nightmare Is a Burrito Full of Guac.](#)"
- Jacob Stern. 2023. "[AI Is Running Circles Around Robotics.](#)"

**Sunday 2/19:** Research proposal due

WEEK 6 **Monday 2/19: NO CLASS**

WEEK 7 **Monday 2/26:** Technocracy: Quantification and abstraction

1. Ted Bouk. 2015. "Fatalizing" in *How Our Days Became Numbered*.
2. Emily Bender et al. 2021. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots."
3. Matteo Pasquinelli. 2022. "From Algorithmism to Algorithm."

Plus:

- Heather Vogell. 2022. "[Rent Going Up?](#)"
- Heather Vogell. 2023. "[DOJ Backs Tenants.](#)"

WEEK 8 **Monday 3/4:** Deep inelegance: Life, consciousness, and existence

1. Jessica Riskin. 2003. "The Defecating Duck, or the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life."
2. Nathan Ensmenger. 2011. "Is Chess the *Drosophila* of Artificial Intelligence?"
3. Carl Frey. 2019. "Artificial Intelligence" in *The Technology Trap*.

Plus:

- Ted Chiang. 2021. "[Why Computers Won't Make Themselves Smarter.](#)"
- James Somers. 2023. "[A Coder Considers the Waning Days of the Craft.](#)"
- Noam Chomsky. 2023. "[The False Promise of ChatGPT.](#)"
- Amanda Geftter. 2023. "[What are Dreams for?](#)"

WEEK 9 **Monday 3/11:** Godmode: Ritual, belief, and wonder

1. Allison Woodruff et al. 2007. "Sabbath Day Home Automation."
2. Meghan O'Glietyn. 2017. "[Ghost in the Cloud.](#)"

3. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic. 2023. "How To Be Human" in *I, Human*.

Plus:

- Adrienne LaFrance. 2023. "[The Coming Humanist Renaissance.](#)"
- Holly Walters. 2023. "[Robots are Performing Hindu Rituals.](#)"

WEEK 10 **Monday 3/18:** Governance: Citizenship and rights in the Automation era

1. Woodrow Hartzog. 2016. "[There Is No Such Thing as "Public" Data.](#)"
2. Sarah Brayne and Angele Christin. 2020. "Technologies of Crime Prediction."
3. Office of Science and Technology Policy. 2022. *Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights*.

Plus:

- Matteo Wong. 2023. "[The AI Crackdown is Coming.](#)"
- Tim Wu. 2023. "[In Regulating AI, We May Be Doing Too Much. And Too Little.](#)"

**Sunday 3/24:** Outline and literature review due

**Monday 3/25: NO CLASS**

WEEK 11 **Monday 4/1:** Unmotivated learning: Education and human capital

1. Josh Dzieza. 2023. "[AI is a Lot of Work.](#)"
2. Christine Smallwood. 2023. "[Misreading the Cues.](#)"
3. Samuel Woolley. 2023. "Understanding Manufactured Consensus" in *Manufacturing Consensus*.

Plus:

- Ian Bogost. 2023. "[The First Year of AI College Ends in Ruin.](#)"
- Rose Horowitz. 2023. "[Here Comes the Second Year of AI College.](#)"
- Ted Chiang. 2023. "[ChatGPT is a Blurry JPEG of the Web.](#)"
- Ted Chiang. 2023. "Will AI Become the New McKinsey?"
- Benj Edwards. 2023. "[Can You Melt Eggs?](#)"
- James Somers. 2023. "[How Will AI Learn Next?](#)"
- Justin Pot. 2023. "[CAPTCHAs Are About to Get So Much More Annoying.](#)"

WEEK 12 **Monday 4/8:** Rational beyond reason: Finance, ecology, and economic warfare

1. Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra. 2019. "Markets in Milliseconds" in *Automating Finance*.
2. Kate Crawford. 2021. "Power" in *The Atlas of AI*.
3. Karen Hao. 2023. "[The New AI Panic.](#)"

Plus:

- Charlie Stross. 2017. [\*Dude, You Broke the Future!\*](#)
- BF Campbell. 2023. "[Perils of Paperclips.](#)"
- Matteo Wong. 2023. "[The Internet's Next Great Power Suck.](#)"
- Issie Lapowsky. 2023. "[Tech Companies' Friendly New Strategy to Destroy One Another.](#)"
- Kevin Roose. 2023. "[AI Belongs to the Capitalists Now.](#)"

WEEK 13      **Monday 4/15:** Heart and soul: What can't be automated(?)

1. Kazuo Ishiguro. 2021. *Klara and the Sun*.
2. Mario Carpo. 2023. "Ways of Making" in *Beyond Digital*.

Plus:

- *Her* (2013, dir. Spike Jonze)
- Dave Beech. 2019. "Avant-Gardism and the Meanings of Automation" in *Art and Postcapitalism*.
- Alex Vadukul. 2022. "[Luddite Teens Don't Want your Likes.](#)"
- Carolina Bandinelli. 2022. "Dating Apps."
- Jennifer Korn. 2023. "[Modern Romance: Falling in Love with AI.](#)"

**Sunday 4/21:** First draft due

WEEK 14      **Monday 4/22:** Research presentations I

WEEK 15      **Monday 4/29:** Research presentations II

**Wednesday 5/8:** Final paper due