Sociology: an extremely powerful instrument of self-analysis that allows one to better understand what one is, by providing an understanding of one’s own social conditions of production and of the position one occupies in the social world

-Roger Pol-Droit
This course examines American life and experience through the lens of cultural sociology (although inevitably an effort to best understand such a broad topic requires a vision that is not limited by arbitrary disciplinary boundaries, so we will not be chained to any one existing discipline’s tools and vision). We will explore a range of topics and themes using the two core concepts of sociology: culture and social structure. The above quote concisely gets at the innovation of these concepts in analyzing human action; it tells us that knowledge of self must inevitably be knowledge of relation because we are all of us, whether we know or like it or not, caught up in webs of interconnection and structure that are neither of our own making nor easily undone.

Most if not all of you have spent your entire lives immersed in American culture and you therefore know a considerable amount about the topic of the course at an informal, visceral level. But look carefully at the following quote from Jean Baudrillard and you will see how phenomena we think we know and understand very well can in fact be seen in ways that are more rigorous and analytical than the everyday. You all know what jogging is, no doubt, but have you ever conceived of it in terms approaching this?

...You stop a horse that is bolting. You do not stop a jogger who is jogging. Foaming at the mouth, his mind riveted on the inner countdown to the moment when he will achieve a higher plane of consciousness, he is not to be stopped. If you stopped him to ask the time, he would bite your head off. He doesn't have a bit between his teeth, though he may perhaps be carrying dumb-bells or even weights in his belt...What the third-century Stylite sought in self-affliction and proud stillness, he is seeking through the muscular exhaustion of his body. He is the brother in mortification of those who conscientiously exhaust themselves in the body-building studies on complicated machines with chrome pulleys and on terrifying medical contraptions. There is a direct line that runs from the medieval instruments of torture, via the industrial movements of production-line work, to the techniques of schooling the body by using mechanical apparatuses. Like dieting, body-building, and so many other things, jogging is a new form of voluntary servitude...Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his [iPod], cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed...The thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into their eyes, that is the world of Blade Runner, the post-catastrophe world...This entire society, including its active, productive part - everyone - is running straight ahead, because they have lost the formula for stopping.

In this class, we are interested in trying to do what Baudrillard is doing here: we want to examine American culture and society in a more considered and formal way than you usually do in everyday life. But while Baudrillard, as a Frenchman, had a certain distance from our culture already built in to his way of seeing, we may perhaps have to work a bit harder to get the proper distance. You will need to cultivate a sense of wonder and strangeness when you look with different lenses at things you have looked at many times before. Anthropologists perhaps benefit in achieving this effect because they generally study societies very much unlike the ones they come from, and so they don't have to work very hard to see those societies as 'strange,' but the same effect can be achieved even when one is examining the very culture in which one is immersed. Indeed, it can even be argued that being inside the culture studied is an advantage for the study because it means the researcher (you) can at least potentially achieve the perspective of both participant and observer, something the anthropologist
arguably cannot do unless she stays in the society she is studying for a few decades or so (and maybe not even then).

**Formal Objectives of the Course:**

You will be introduced to the ways in which individuals interact with, and are shaped by, social groups, institutions, and social structures and how these social constructions shape history, space, values, culture, and behavior.

You will learn to use the tools of sociological analysis to critically interpret social issues.

You will learn to use the principles of sociological analysis to envision improvements in human society.

You will acquire contextualized knowledge about various aspects of complex group interactions in the United States.

You will learn to use concepts and tools of inquiry to analyze issues related to the diversity of cultural experiences in the United States.

You will learn to reflect critically on the ways in which diversity within the United States shapes the experience of citizens and persons residing there.

**Course Requirements:**

1. You must attend class regularly to do well. I will take attendance daily and 10% of your final grade is based solely on attendance.

2. No laptops or other such communicative devices may be used during class unless you have some special accommodation to this effect. Phones are also to be turned off or, better yet, left at home. These devices are wonderful in their proper time and place, but in this class they are not conducive to what we want to accomplish.

3. There will be quizzes on most sections of readings and Power Point notes. These quizzes will be posted on Blackboard several days in advance of the due date and the answers (clearly numbered) should be forwarded to me by e-mail. I will notify you about the deadline of each quiz when I post the quiz. The format of the quizzes is multiple choice and true/false; if you have done the relevant reading, the quizzes should not take more than 15-30 minutes to complete. These quizzes cumulatively are worth 40% of your total class grade. If you do not take a quiz by the deadline, you receive a zero on that quiz. Quizzes cannot be made up or taken later. There are no exceptions to this rule.

4. Each of you will be assigned to a group with several of your peers and the group will use material from course readings to do a cultural sociological analysis of a film you will watch. The films are as follows: **Outfoxed, Jesus Camp, Frontline: The Vanishing Father, The One Percent, De Nadie, Killer at Large, Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer, and The Aggressives.** Most of these films are in the library; those that are not can be found on YouTube or elsewhere online in their entirety. This assignment consists of both an in-class presentation and a 4-5 page
paper submitted to me. Together, the presentation and paper are worth 20% of your final grade. It is imperative that the labor be equally shared on this assignment, and I will closely monitor situations to be sure no one is getting credit without contributing to the project.

5. The final 30% of your course grade is made up of two in-class essay exams (each worth 15%), one at the mid-term and the second at the end of the term. You will be provided possible questions in advance, so you are encouraged to work on your answers before the actual time of the exam. Each exam covers only material from one half of the term. The format is short answer.

Here are the grading system and the course grade breakdown for easy reference:

- 93% and up = A (4)
- 90%-92% = A- (3.67)
- 87%-89% = B+ (3.33)
- 83%-86% = B (3)
- 80%-82% = B- (2.67)
- 77%-79% = C+ (2.33)
- 73%-76% = C (2)
- 70%-72% = C- (1.67)
- 60%-69% = D (1)
- 59% and under = F (0)

1. **Attendance** = 10%
2. **Quizzes** = 40%
3. **Group Presentation and Paper** = 20%
4. **Midterm and Final Exams** = 30%

**Texts:**

2. Assorted recommended readings on Blackboard
COURSE THEMES AND SCHEDULE (subject to change as required)

Thinking about America in the Conceptual Language of Sociology

The Spectacle of American Consumption: A) Lakewood Megachurch, Houston, Texas; B) King of Prussia Mall in Pennsylvania

1. August 24 (W): Introduction to Course


   Reading: CIS, chapter 1

   Recommended: “Popular Rituals” (Blackboard)

   Study: PowerPoint notes (PP hereafter) on Cultural Narratives, Myths, and Rituals

3. August 29 (M): Conceptual Language of Cultural Sociology of American Society (cont.) and How Sociology is Done

   Reading: CIS, chapter 2

   Recommended: “Sociology as a Way of Seeing” (Blackboard)

4. August 31 (W): The Cultural Diamond

   Reading: CIS, chapter 3

   Recommended: “Culture and the Cultural Diamond” (Blackboard)

   Study: PP on Using Griswold’s Cultural Diamond
5. September 2 (F): Consumption and American Culture

Recommended: “A Tour of the New Means of Consumption” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on The Cathedrals of Consumption

Media in American Culture and Society

Distinct American Varieties of Individualism: A) “The Puritan”; B) “Cat Man”

Mass-Mediated American Politics: A) Press conference at Harrisburg State Capitol; B) “Cowboy” Presidents Reagan and Bush

1. September 5 (M): American Individualism

Reading: CIS, chapter 5

Recommended: “A City Upon a Hill” and “The 19th Century American” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on American Individualism

2. September 7 (W): American Media

Reading: CIS, chapter 4
Recommended: “Capitalist Realism” and “Supersaturation” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on Mass Media and American Culture

3. September 9 (F): American Media (cont.)

Recommended: “Television in the Family Circle” (Blackboard)

Student Presentation: Outfoxed

4. September 12 (M): Youth Culture, and American Media

Recommended: “Gangsters, Real and Unreal” and “Introduction to Donna Gaines” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on Youth Culture and Media

5. September 14 (W): Youth Culture, and American Media (cont.)

American Stratification: Social Class

Class Stratification in America: A) Homeless men; B) Forbes Magazine “Richest People in America”

Educational Institutions and American Status: Students wearing school shirts
1. September 16 (F): Basics of Stratification, Inequality, and Social Class

Reading: CIS, chapter 8

Study: PP on Stratification in the United States

2. September 19 (M): Stratification and Class in America

Reading: CIS, chapter 12

Recommended: “The Invisible Poor” and “Unequal America” (Blackboard)

3. September 21 (W): Social Class as Culture in America

Recommended: “The American Myth of Success” and “The Rise of Yuppie Coffees” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on Culture and Social Class

4. September 23 (F): Education, Culture, Status, and Stratification in American Society

Reading: CIS, chapter 13

Recommended: “The Power and Limits of Social Class” (Blackboard)

Study: PP on Education in American Society

5. September 26 (M): Education, Culture, Status, and Stratification in American Society (cont.)

Recommended: “Culture Wars: Education” (Blackboard)

Student Presentation: The One Percent
The American Desire for Race: Two *Time* covers with A) pre-teen murderer Robert “Yummy” Sandifer and B) computer-generated multiracial American woman of the future

1. **September 28 (W): Race as a Social Construction and Racial and Ethnic Identity in America**
   - Reading: CIS, chapter 10
   - Recommended: “Racial Formation” (Blackboard)
   - Study: PP on Race and Ethnicity in American Society

2. **September 30 (F): Racial and Ethnic Identity in America (cont.) and Racial Stratification in American History**
   - Recommended: “The Paradoxes of Integration” (Blackboard)
   - Study: PP on Race and Stratification in American Society

3. **October 3 (M): Racial Stratification in American History (cont.)**

4. **October 5 (W): Immigration and American Society**
   - Reading: “Who They Are and Why They Come” (Blackboard)
   - Study: PP on Immigration and American Society

5. **October 7 (F): Social Movements in American Society (Example: Civil Rights Movement)**
   - Reading: CIS, chapter 18
Study: PP on Civil Rights Movement

6. October 12 (W): Social Movements in American Society (cont.)

**Student Presentation: De Nadie**

Midterm Exam October 14 (F)

*Politics and the State in American Culture*

![Image: Election 2008 poster depicting then candidate Barack Obama as a Muslim terrorist]

Tea Party America: Election 2008 poster depicting then candidate Barack Obama as a Muslim terrorist

1. October 17 (M): Politics, Ideology and the State in America

Reading: CIS, chapter 17

Study: PP on Politics, Ideology and the State in America

*Urbanism and Population in America*

![Image: The Mythical American Community: Depicted in a painting by Thomas Kinkade]
1. October 19 (F): The Myth of American Community

Reading: CIS, chapter 16

Study: PP on The Myth of American Community

1. October 21 (F): Basic Sociology of Crime and Deviance and Guns, Violence, and Homicide in America

Reading: CIS, chapter 11

Study: PP on Homicide in America

2. October 24 (M): Guns, Violence, and Homicide in America (cont.)

Recommended: “Inside Gun Shows” (Blackboard)

Student Presentation: Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer

1. October 26 (W): American Religion seen Sociologically
Reading: CIS, chapter 15
Study: PP on American Religions

2. October 28 (F): Religion, Identity, and Conflict in American Society and Civil Religion and Sport as American Religion

   Recommended: “Color Blind” and “That Old Flag Magic” (Blackboard)

3. October 31 (M): Sport as Religion in America

   Recommended: “Apollo Undone” (Blackboard)

   Study: PP on Sport in American Culture

4. November 2 (W): Sport as Religion in America (cont.)

   Student Presentation: Jesus Camp

   The American Family

   American family portrait, with vanished father

1. November 4 (F): Sociology of the American Family

   Reading: CIS, chapter 7

   Study: PP on The American Family

2. November 7 (M): Mothers, Fathers, Marriage, Divorce and Changes in the Family Structure in America

   Recommended: “The Remarkable Decline of Fatherhood and Marriage” and “Deinstitutionalize Marriage?” (Blackboard)

3. November 9 (W): Mothers, Fathers, Marriage, Divorce and Changes in the Family Structure in America (cont.)
Student Presentation: Frontline: The Vanishing Father

American Sexuality

Visions of American Sexuality: A) Sexually-themed t-shirts for toddlers (captions reading e.g., “My mom's hotter than your mom” and “Does this diaper make my butt look big?); B) Mass-mediated Spring Break debauchery.

1. November 11 (F): Ascetics and Hedonists

Reading: CIS, chapters 6 and 9

Study: PP on Sex in America

2. November 14 (M): Sexual Networks in American Society

Recommended: “Who are our sex partners?” and “Homosexuality” (Blackboard)

3. November 16 (W): Sexual Networks in American Society (cont.)

Student Presentation: The Aggressives

The American Body

The Gendered Utopia/Dystopia of the American Body: A) Men with steroid-aided arms; B) Woman with world's largest breast implants
1. November 18 (F): Basic Sociology of the Body

   Reading: CIS, chapter 14

   Study: PP on The American Body

2. November 21 (M): The Manipulated American Body

   Recommended: “Social Bodies” (Blackboard)

3. November 28 (M): Death and the Body in America

   Recommended: “Consumer's Last Rites” (Blackboard)

   Study: The Sociology of (American) Death

4. November 30 (W): Death and the Body in America (cont.)

   **Student Presentation: Killer at Large**

   December 2: Exam Review

   December 5: Final Exam