Writing About Auctions in Sociology 215  
(revised August 31, 2012)  

Related readings:  

This writing assignment relates to the film we will view in class on Wednesday, September 15, and our Blackboard readings for that week, Hunter and Milofsky, Chapter Three, E. Klinenberg, "Race, place, and vulnerability", and R.D. Putnam, "Bowling alone."

This assignment must be turned in via e-mail or in class by Monday, September 3. You ought to do this writing assignment as soon after you visit your auction as possible although you might want to wait for our class on September 3 when we discuss auction experiences to write your final draft. Feel free to turn it in whenever you finish it. I intend to grade these and have them back to you within a couple of weeks and the ones that come in first will be graded first.

In this assignment you are asked to locate and visit one of the many small town auctions that are held in summer and fall in Central Pennsylvania. You should have looked at the "Finding Auctions" link on this website which provides you with a description of what they are and where to find them. It would be helpful for you also to look at (and perhaps respond to) the reading discussion questions given for August 29, August 31, and September 3 and to incorporate the issues they raise into your paper discussion.

**This assignment has two objectives.**

**One is to place you in an unfamiliar setting** where there are many social activities and relationships to observe, where many kinds of people are interacting, and where values we each hold and that the people we are observing manifest all come to the surface. There multiple, somewhat separate dimensions of interaction going on at the same time and we call this social quality “multiplexity”’. This is an exercise to demonstrate the existence of multiplexity and the richness of social life and we want that richness to lead to thoughtful field notes writing and to classroom discussion. This is the first step in an understanding of what sociologists and anthropologists try to do when they do ethnographic observation. Your paper ought to provide a detailed, evocative description of the rich social scene you encounter and discuss your feelings and the reactions you have to the things you see and experience.
The second objective is for you to look for and describe social structure in community life. Social structure includes distinct social roles you see participants at the auction playing. It includes dimensions of difference in terms of social class, social affiliation and community involvement. You are likely to notice difference from your own background in terms of the wealth and social style of the people at the auction. You are likely to learn some things about the person whose goods are being sold. You may notice differences among the people attending the auction, especially the many different roles they play. Count the number of people you see; list the roles you observe; note down the possessions on sale that interest you and tell what they represent. Any single auction represents the life of one person (the person whose goods are sold) and the presence of a collection of groups. You need to be mindful of the fact that the groups and roles and relationships you see are relatively permanent, ongoing parts of the community that you are visiting. An auction brings permanent aspects of community structure into view. Talk about this in your paper.

What to Do

Your paper ought to be short. Write the length you want to write, but you can do this assignment in 3 or 4 pages. As you get ready to write, think about specific things that you found most noticeable, interesting, and intriguing. Often these things involve contrasts to things you are used to from home or from the cultural groups you are part of. Concentrate your paper on these things. Avoid taking up all the space in your paper by describing the overall scene, how you got there, and how comfortable or uncomfortable you and your friends felt in the scene.

When you talk about the interesting aspects you have identified, describe things in as much detail as you can. Be mindful of the way that specific actions often have multiple meanings to the people who are part of this setting. Can you see evidence of these multiple meanings and describe them at work? Try to tell what you expected, and how what you saw differed from your expectation. What sense do you make of the difference between your expectation and what you saw?

In addition to describing particular aspects of the scene, talk also about aspects of community that you saw. When you do that, it helps to "position" the people or the events or the scene in relationship to the structural aspects of community mentioned above, given in our reading, or discussed in class.

I have suggested lots of things to look at and write about. You don’t need to attend to all of these suggestions in your paper. I really mean it that you should write 3-4 pages. The important thing is to concentrate on a few events that you found particularly interesting.