Class #9: Auctions and Communities
Discussion Questions for September 24
Readings: Putnam, Film in Class: A Country Auction

Because writing assignments are meant to prepare you for class discussions, you must post a draft question on the Moodle Forum for this date if you want your submission to count. After posting a draft, you must revise and resubmit your final response for a grade by the following Sunday night. In the case of questions posted below, the final draft of your question is due by the end of the day on Sunday, September 29. Include your name, the full question number, and the text of the question on both your draft and final submissions.

Discussion Questions

9-1 What does social capital mean in the context of an auction like the one you visited?

When we do research we often refer to a text like Putnam where the general meaning of a concept is laid out but then we have to create an “operational definition” that will work for us in terms of helping to both describe a setting and to formulate hypotheses or other explanations of how the things we see relate to important impacts or outcomes that we may only be able to imagine being important. You’ll want to think about whether social capital is present in your auction setting, how you know, and in a grounded way related to the people and the setting you see how the presence of that social capital might matter.

9-2 Rural estate auctions are death rituals in Central Pennsylvania. Tell what aspects of the auction you visited struck you as death rituals. How did you respond to the ritual aspects of the event?

Some of our students visiting auctions have found them very odd and even somewhat offensive because of the ways they differ from functionally similar processes in students’ home cultures and communities. In other students’ home communities elderly people are quietly removed to nursing homes or hospitals and the death process is distant and impersonal. To these people auctions seem like intimate, warm celebrations of life. Reflect on the processes we use to mark the ends of lives in our communities and talk about how those processes gain meaning.

9-3 What makes an object significant?

I know, this is a hopelessly vague question. But it is not vague in the context of auctions we have visited or that we see reported in the film. You can respond to this question in a powerful way by talking about an object that was bid for energetically at your auction, where you could not understand its value by just looking at it, but where through conversation or comments overheard you understood why the object had value. Alternatively, you could talk about specific objects presented in the film and talk about reasons and
ways different objects demonstrated significance to auction participants. If you respond referring to the film, try to give an abstract or theoretical analysis that is linked to the specific instances you want to describe to try to explain why in a community history and legacy are important.