

SOCIOL 390
Meritocracy and the American Dream
SPRING 2018

Instructor: Lauren Valentino

Day and time: T, Th 3:05-4:20pm

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Office Hours: M, W 3:30-5pm (or by appt)

Overview and Objectives

This course examines whether the United States is a meritocratic society, and the extent to which the American Dream is accessible to all. We will focus on two areas of inquiry in this course, covering the disciplinary subfields of the sociology of stratification and inequality and the sociology of culture. Firstly, we will investigate how much (in)equality exists in the U.S., and the reasons for these socioeconomic disparities as established in the social science literature. Secondly, we will explore the narratives Americans espouse about the degree of meritocracy and equality of opportunity in the U.S. and why these narratives are so persistent, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary.

We begin by surveying the social science research on stratification and inequality. We will take a close look at how social scientists measure and assess foundational concepts such as socioeconomic status and class, and we will chart how these group boundaries have changed over time. By following the theoretical progression of the topics of poverty and wealth in social science over the 20th and 21st centuries, students will become intimately familiar with the key reasons for which socioeconomic inequality has persisted - and worsened - in the U.S. in recent decades.

We will then take a 'cultural turn,' conducting close readings of historical accounts of the so-called American character and civic religion in order to understand the origins of the narratives of meritocracy and the 'American Dream' that animate our personal and communal imaginations to this day. As we will see, these narratives have deep religious and secular roots that extend to the founding of the nation-state. Yet these narratives have also entered our collective memory such that they represent strikingly different ideas today than they perhaps did in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The remainder of the course will be spent seeking to understand how these narratives continue to dominate the public and private spheres of U.S. Americans to this day. We will explore a variety of possible cultural mechanisms, including symbolic boundaries, rugged individualism, class-based socialization and habitus, and system justification theory. To flesh out these theories, students will be guided through two collaborative long-term projects throughout the semester: a content analysis and an interview project. Both projects will

give us the opportunity to explore the particular contours of American Dream narratives in the media and about how various groups mobilize these narratives of meritocracy and deservingness to frame their own lives.

As such, the goals of this course are to:

- Provide students with factual knowledge about and raise their awareness of the various forms and degrees of inequality in the contemporary United States
- Promote students' understanding of the fundamental concepts and principles regarding social inequality, such as "capital," "reproduction," and "mobility," as well as fundamental theories and constructs from cultural sociology, such as "frame," "repertoire," and "habitus"
- Foster students' ability to apply knowledge, concepts, and theories from cultural sociology to problems facing our community, our nation, and our broader world
- Encourage students to analyze ideas, arguments, and different points of view about the extent of inequality in modern society and the reasons for the persistence of that inequality
- Empower students to synthesize and integrate knowledge about inequality and culture into 'big picture' ideas that can have implications for advocacy and activism, government and nonprofit policy, law, medicine and health care, education, and business, among other areas
- Engage students with the methods social scientists use to conduct inquiries about social inequality and cultural sociology
- Facilitate students' capacity to evaluate the merits of ideas and competing claims about the extent of and reasons for the existence of inequality and its cultural narratives
- Enhance students' ability to effectively communicate ideas orally through participation in in-class discussion
- Equip students with research design, data collection and analysis skills through the content analysis and interview projects
- Boost students' ability to effectively communicate ideas in writing through response papers and two research papers.

Requirements

You are expected to read/watch all materials *before* the class period under which the items are listed on the syllabus. For each class meeting, you are expected to complete a 1-2 page **reading response paper** based on that day's reading, which you will submit via the Assignments portal on Sakai. Sakai will only accept assignments up until 5 pm the day before the class meets. The reading response should incorporate concepts from both the readings

and prior topics we've covered in class. They may also include personal (sociologically relevant) reflections about your own life, when applicable. These papers will be graded on a check/check-minus/check-plus scale. I will use excerpts from your response papers to jump-start our discussions. Please see the "Guidelines for Reading Responses" document on Sakai for more information of what is expected. **Attendance** at and participation in every class is therefore critically important. (See related section on Attendance Policy and un/excused absences.)

The course is structured around two, long-term collaborative projects: a **content analysis** and an **interview project**. We have specified days during the course when we will learn more about each of these methods, as well as examples of how researchers use each method to uncover new and interesting findings.

For the **content analysis**, the class will select one corpus - a bounded, media-based source of cultural narratives - (e.g. Norman Rockwell illustrations featured in the Saturday Evening Post) that contains interesting thematic content relative to discourse around meritocracy and the American Dream. Each class member will be responsible for analyzing one part of the corpus and will present their part of the corpus (their "case") during the Content Analysis Presentation Days (March 6 & 8). They must post either the case itself (if it is text-based, like a speech) or a written summary (1-2 pages, if it is not text-based, such as a piece of art) of the case as well as a brief (2-3 page) interpretive write-up of their "case" that will be viewable by all on Sakai no later than March 9. Individually, each student will then draw on the entire corpus of analyzed material to write a 5-7 page research paper that thematically organizes the corpus and draws larger conclusions about the type of messages and information that is conveyed about meritocracy and the American Dream. This paper is due the first class period after Spring Break (March 20). Further guidelines - including rubric - for the presentation, initial case summary/analysis, and paper are provided on Sakai in the "Content Analysis Resources" folder.

For the **interview project**, the class will select one comparison of focus (e.g. first-generation U.S. immigrants vs native-born Americans) to examine how these two groups of individuals frame, interpret, and understand their own life trajectories through the lens of meritocracy and the American Dream. The class will work together to create and refine an interview guide containing an outline of the kinds of questions they will ask their interviewees. Each class member will be responsible for conducting one in-depth interview and will present the interview (their "case") during the Interview Presentation Days (April 17 & 19). They must post a transcript of their interview as well as a brief (2-3 page) interpretive write-up of their "case" that will be viewable by all on Sakai no later than April 20. Individually, each student will once again draw on the entire set of interviews to write a 7-9 page research paper that highlights important themes and draws contrasts and similarities across the two comparison groups in order to derive theoretical implications for how people make sense of socioeconomic reproduction and mobility in their own lives. This paper is due during our final exam period (May 4). Further guidelines - including rubric - for the presentation, initial case transcription/analysis, and paper are provided on Sakai in the "Interview Project Resources" folder.

Grades

Your grade in this course will be based on the following:

- Attendance and in-class participation - every class - 10%
- Reading response papers - due every Monday/Wednesday at 5 pm - 15%
- Content analysis case presentation - on March 6 or March 8 - 10%
- Content analysis initial case summary/analysis - due March 9 - 10%
- Content analysis paper - due March 20 - 15%
- Interview project case presentation - on April 17 or April 19 - 10%
- Interview project initial case transcription/analysis - due April 20 - 10%
- Interview project paper - due May 4 - 20 %

Grading scale:

- **A+** 97-100
- **A** 93-96.9
- **A-** 90-92.9
- **B+** 87-89.9
- **B** 84-86.9
- **B-** 80-83.9
- **C+** 77-79.9
- **C** 74-76.9
- **C-** 70-73.9
- **D** 60-69.9
- **F** 0-59.9

Extra credit opportunity: One opportunity for extra credit will be available in this course. This extra credit assignment is optional, but no further chances to improve your grade will be offered.

You may find a current news item or magazine article (can be an opinion [“op-ed”] piece) that pertains to the topic of socioeconomic inequality, meritocracy, and/or the American Dream (pieces relevant to the U.S. only). Post a link to the item on the “Meritocracy and the American Dream in the News” Sakai Discussion Forum, along with a brief (around 1 paragraph) reaction to the piece. Your post should discuss how subjects brought up in the

piece relate to topics we have discussed in the course. Once a particular article or piece has been posted, it may not be posted again by another student.

Successfully completing this assignment may earn you up to a maximum of 1 extra point on your final grade (enough to bump you from a B- to B, for example, but won't make a C into an A). Posts that are incomplete, do not deeply engage with material, or relate tangentially to course topics will not receive full credit. You must have posted to Sakai by 5 pm on the last day of this course (4/24).

Attendance and Deadline Policy

This class emphasizes class discussion and participation, meaning attending class is critical. Students must notify the instructor in advance if they will miss class. No absences will be excused without email submission of the forms required as per Duke policies, including the [Notification of Varsity Athletic Participation \(NOVAP\) form](#), [Religious Observance Form](#), [Short-Term Illness Notification Form \(STINF\)](#), official notification of a job interview, or other official Duke forms available for emergencies. Further information on Duke's policies regarding missed classes can be found [here](#). Students are responsible for getting materials from missed classes. Work turned in after posted due dates or missed during unexcused absences will receive a zero.

Laptop & Phone Policy

We will engage with lots of different kinds of material in this class - such as videos, comic strips, live polls, and interactive websites. This means you will need a laptop, tablet, or phone for class. Please bring one of these to each class period. However, you are permitted to use this technology *during designated times only*. This means that you *may not* use your laptop, tablet, or phone at any other time in class. You are thus advised to take notes using pen and paper, and you should bring a paper copy of the readings. I will be very strict about enforcing this. Violating this policy will result in a 0 for your attendance/participation grade for that day.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to act in accordance with Duke's [Community Standard](#). Violations of this policy include, but are not limited to cheating (intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise) and plagiarism (knowingly representing the words of another as one's own in any academic exercise). Violations of the Duke Community Standard will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct.

Required Texts

- All assigned material - which includes readings, websites, and films - are available on Sakai or as direct links through the syllabus. See the “Materials” folder on Sakai.

Commitment to Diversity

Duke is committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse community. This is also a personal commitment that I take very seriously and expect each of you to undertake as well. That means our classroom will be a place where everyone - regardless of race, gender, age, ethnicity, cultural heritage or nationality; religious or political beliefs; sexual orientation or gender identity; or socioeconomic, veteran or ability status - has the right to inclusion, respect, agency, and voice. If there is anything I can do to ensure that the course and/or class meets this standard in your case, please reach out to me via email or by visiting me during my office hours.

Course Outline

Social Science on Inequality

1. Thursday 1/11 - Introduction to the Course

- Read syllabus
- Familiarize yourself with the Sakai site
- Fill out “Getting to Know You” survey

2. Tuesday 1/16 - Origins of the American Dream & Why the American Dream Matters

- Adams, James Truslow. 2017. [1931]. Introduction and Preface (p. 1-9) in *The Epic of America*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miller, Brian and Mike Lapham. 2012. Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 2-24). *The Self-Made Myth: The Truth about How Government Helps Individuals and Businesses*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

3. Thursday 1/18 - Concepts in Inequality Research

- Gilbert, Dennis. 2008. Chapter 1-4 (pp. 1-100) in *American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

4. Tuesday 1/23 - Culture of Poverty

- Lewis, Oscar. 2011 [1961]. Foreword and Introduction (pp. xv-xx, xxii-xlii) in *Children of Sanchez*. New York, NY: Second Vintage Books.

- Harrington, Michael. 1997 [1962] Chapter 9: The Two Nations (pp. 158-174) in *The Other America*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- The Moynihan Report (annotated version available [here](#)).

5. Thursday 1/25 - Genetics

- Herrnstein, Richard J. and Charles Murray. 1994. Chapter 5 (pp. 117-142) in *The Bell Curve*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Fischer, Claude S., Martin Sanchez Jankowski, Michael Hout, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss. 1996. Chapter 5 (pp. 102-123) in *Inequality by Design*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

6. Tuesday 1/30 - Recent Trends in Inequality

- Wright, Erik O. and Joel Rogers. 2011. Chapters 11-13 (pp. 245-296) in *American Society: How It Really Works*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

7. Thursday 2/1 - Poverty

- Bowles, Samuel, Steven N. Durlauf, and Karla Hoff. 2006. Chapters 2-5 (pp. 43-138) in *Poverty Traps*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

8. Tuesday 2/6 - Wealth

- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. Introduction (pp. 1-46) in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Keister, Lisa A. and Stephanie Moller. 2000. "Wealth Inequality in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 26:63-81.

Secular & Religious Historical Narratives

1. Thursday 2/8 - Foundational Myths I

- The Declaration of Independence (link to transcript [here](#))
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835. Preface and Chapter 3 (pp. v-xi, 42-50) in *Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Adlard.

2. Tuesday 2/13 - Foundational Myths II

- Franklin, Benjamin. 1818. Excerpts (pp. 245-254) from *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 3*. London, UK: Valpy.
- Weber, Max. 2003 [1930]. Chapter 2 (pp. 47-78) in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

3. Thursday 2/15 - Rags to Riches

- Alger, Horatio. (Short story collection). “Henry Trafton’s Independence,” “John Rawson’s Christmas Present,” “John Stevenson’s Good Fortune,” “Aunt Jane’s Ear Trumpet,” “Old Simon, the Miser,” “The Lottery Ticket,” “Mrs. Brewer’s Boarders,” and “My First and Last School.” Access the stories [here](#).
- Film *The Gold Rush* (1942)

4. Tuesday 2/20 - Introduction to Content Analysis

- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2018. Chapter 14 (pp. 354-379) in *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smirnova, Michelle H. 2012. “A Will to Youth: The Woman’s Anti-Aging Elixir.” *Social Science and Medicine*. 75:1236-1243.
- NOTE: We will select content analysis area of focus (corpus) by the end of this class period. You will also sign up for your case presentation slot.

5. Thursday 2/22 - The Frontier

- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1921. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Chapter 1 (pp. 1-38) in *The Frontier in American History*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.
- Film *Stagecoach* (1935)
- NOTE: I will post the final list of cases within the corpus on Sakai by 5 pm on 2/23 (Friday). You must sign up on Sakai for your case by next class (Tuesday, 2/27).

6. Tuesday 2/27 - Theodicy

- Turner, Bryan S. 1996. “Theodicy: The Career of a Concept” (pp. 142-176) in *For Weber: Essays on the Sociology of Fate*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berger, Peter. 1990 [1967] Chapter 3: The Problem of Theodicy (pp. 53-80) in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

7. Thursday 3/1 - Prosperity

- Bowler, Kate. 2013. Introduction and Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-138) in *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

8. Tuesday 3/6 - Content Analysis Case Presentations

- Group 1

9. Thursday 3/8 - Content Analysis Case Presentations

- Group 2
- NOTE: Content analysis initial case summary/analysis must be posted on Sakai no later than 3/9 (Friday) at 5 pm.

Spring Break - (no class on 3/13 or 3/15)

Cultural Mechanisms behind the Persistence of the Myth

1. Tuesday 3/20 - Individualism & Collectivism

- NOTE: Content analysis paper due!
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. Chapter 6: Individualism (pp. 142-163) in *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Markus, Hazel R. and Shinobu Kitayama. 1991. "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation." *Psychological Review*. 98(2):224-253.

2. Thursday 3/22 - Stratification Beliefs

- Kluegel, James R. and Eliot R. Smith. 1986. Introduction, Chapters 3-5 (pp. 2-7, 37-142) in *Beliefs about Inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge.

3. Tuesday 3/27 - Learning to Deserve Poverty

- Willis, Paul. 1978. Chapters 1-2 (pp. 1-51) in *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- MacLeod, Jay. 1987. Chapters 3 and 5 (pp. 25-50, 62-83) in *Ain't No Makin' It*. New York, NY: Routledge.

4. Thursday 3/29 - Making Sense of Poverty

- Young, Alford A. 2004. Introduction and Chapter 6 (pp. 3-15 and 156-179) in *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lamont, Michele. 2000. Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-54) in *The Dignity of Working Men*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

5. Tuesday 4/3 - Introduction to Interviewing

- Marvasti, Amir B. 2004. Chapter 2: Interviews (pp. 14-33) in *Qualitative Research in Sociology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harvard's Guide to Conducting Sociological Interviews (link [here](#))
- NOTE: We will select the focal comparison for the two interview groups by the end of this class period. You will also sign up for your case presentation slot.

6. Thursday 4/5 - Learning to Deserve Wealth

- Brooks, David. 2001. Introduction and Chapter 1: The Rise of the Educated Class (pp. 9-53) in *Bobos in Paradise*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Khan, Shamus R. 2011. Chapter 3: The Ease of Privilege (pp. 77-113) in *Privilege*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- NOTE: I will post the final interview question guide on Sakai by 5 pm on 4/6 (Friday).

7. Tuesday 4/10 - Making Sense of Wealth

- Vance, J.D. 2016. Introduction (pp. 1-10) in *Hillbilly Elegy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Sherman, Rachel. 2017. Introduction and Chapter 2 (pp. 1-27, 58-91) in *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Play the “Are You a Dream Hoarder?” game ([link here](#)). Make sure to watch the video at the end of the game!

8. Thursday 4/12 - Just Worlds & Justified Systems

- Jost, John T. 2017. “A Theory of System Justification.” *Psychological Science Agenda*. (Link [here](#).)
- Lerner, Melvin. 1980. Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-30) in *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. New York, NY: Springer.

9. Tuesday 4/17 - Interview Project Case Presentations

- Group 1

10. Thursday 4/19 - Interview Project Case Presentations

- Group 2
- NOTE: Interview project initial case transcription/analysis must be posted on Sakai no later than 4/20 (Friday) at 5 pm.

Conclusions & Implications

1. Tuesday 4/24 - Wrapping Up

- Catch-up, if necessary
- Review, if necessary
- What does this mean for the future of socioeconomic inequality in the U.S.?
- Is the U.S. exceptional? Has the American Dream been exported to other countries?
- How can we apply this framework to other types of inequality?
- NOTE: Last day for extra credit Sakai post (deadline at 5 pm)

2. Friday 5/4 - Final Exam Slot

- Final Interview Project Paper due at 12 noon via Sakai assignments portal.