

SOCIOLOGY 420—Advanced Topics in Sociology
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Office: North Court 115
Fall 2008
Monday, 1:00 – 4:00 p.m.
KRJH 110

There are several goals in this course: (1) To expose you (the students) to a wide range of powerful and provocative sociological analyses, so you (a) get an idea of what social science can accomplish and (b) can enjoy talking about ideas in a group with other sharp students; (2) to give you a chance to explore a couple of these analyses (i.e., two of the books) in real depth; and (3) to let you work seriously on your writing without the usual “paper-a-week” sort of time pressure.

Therefore, here’s our format:

Everyone will read all of the books for the class, but each student will be particularly responsible for mastering any two of the books, which they will choose.

At each meeting, two students will lead a discussion on the book for that week; this will occupy the first half of the class or so. We will then take a short break. After the break, we will continue discussion on the book until our time is up.

Each of you will lead two discussions and write two 10-15 page papers during the term. There will be ample opportunity for revisions and rewriting. We’ll talk more about this in class.

Finally, every student in the class will turn in, every week, a one-page “memo” or “booknotes” on the book for the week, consisting of interesting ideas from the reading, and some reactions. I’ll explain this more in class, but the idea is just to show that you’ve read the book and gotten some intellectual substance from it. These won’t be graded in the conventional sense, but will count in your participation grade for the course.

Grading: The grading reflects the priorities you should have in your work.

- 1) Class participation, including discussion leading and booknotes, will count as 60% of your grade.
- 2) Each paper will count as 20%.

DATE**READING**

Sept. 1

Organizational Meeting—talk books, etc.

Sept. 08

Restless Nation: Starting over in America by James M. Jasper

- Read entire book

Published only a few years ago, this book is a wonderful introduction to a sociological understanding of America. Jasper takes the theme of American mobility – the fact that we move a lot, that our ancestors were mostly immigrants, that we move to solve our problems—and around this thesis builds the entire story of the United States, our economics, our history, and our culture. Every chapter opens a new door on how this theme describes who Americans are. Jasper is a sociologist who could – although this book doesn't show it – double as a standup comedian. He's one of the funniest people I've had the pleasure of meeting. He also writes exceptionally well and thinks broadly. Enjoy the book.

Sept. 15

Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance by Howard Becker

- All except chapters 5 & 6

Probably the most famous book ever written on the subject of deviance – that is, on being different from the normal person. This includes criminals, but also includes the mentally ill, the pathological, the sick, the delinquent, the “bad kid,” and so on and so forth. Becker's book uses some fairly simple field studies (of marijuana users, of jazz musicians) to develop a clearly stated and brilliant theoretical position. Becker holds – and this book came out in the early 1960s – that deviance is not a matter of what one does, but of how other people respond to it. This came to be called the “labeling” theory of deviance, in which being labeled as a deviant was more important than actually committing the act, at least in its ramifications. The book is a classic because it is a very powerful theory that is written so a college freshman can understand it. Becker was part of the University of Chicago graduate student cohort that also produced Joseph Gusfield and Kai Erikson, whose books we are also reading – a collection of brilliant, clear-writing people who seem to have an almost intuitive understanding of how human beings work. Erving Goffman was also part of this group, although a little bit older than the others.

Sept. 22

Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics & the American Temperance Movement (2nd edition) by Joseph R. Gusfield

- Read pp. 1 – 35, 111 – 149, 166 – 210

Another member of the Chicago cohort described above, Gusfield became famous for analyses of social movements, in particular the Temperance Movement, and later the anti-drunk driving movement (for instance, MADD). In *Symbolic Crusade*, Gusfield demonstrates that what appears on the surface to be a movement for the abolition of alcoholic beverages, climaxing in the 19th Amendment to the Constitution which banned alcoholic beverages in the United States, was really driven by an underlying cultural conflict between native, rural Protestant Americans and immigrant, city-dwelling Catholics. The details are fascinating, but the overall point is that what often show themselves as moral debates are really undergirded by more fundamental conflicts between very specific social groups. In this way, his argument is similar to that in Kristen Luker's book, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. We will skim over much of the earlier historical material in Gusfield, but the theoretical argument that dominates the second half of the book is very important.

Sept. 29

Everything in its Path by Kai T. Erikson

- Read entire book

Erikson was my adviser in graduate school, and is the only person ever to win the American Sociological Association book prize twice. A beautiful, thoughtful book on the nature of community, showing that a community disaster is more than the sum of individual problems. Students often get confused a bit by the term "axes of variation" that Erikson uses. He basically means: ongoing important issues for those people, for instance, the conflict between a love of tradition on the one hand and respect for personal liberty on the other. Axes of variation refer to the dimensions that raise serious continuing questions or problems for a community of people.

Oct. 6

Education, Social Status and Health by John Mirowsky and Catherine E. Ross

- Read chapters 1 – 4, 6, 8

This is a very different kind of book than the others, representing the genre that Andrew Abbott calls "Standard Causal Analysis." Mirowsky and Ross use multivariable analysis of surveys, primarily using regression analysis, to understand what are the prime determinants of Americans' health. It's based on surveys – some of the most finely designed and well conducted surveys ever done. Throughout the book Mirowsky and Ross are relating variables to each other in a way that those of you who have taken

Research Methods will be quite familiar with. Don't worry too much about the numbers; their narrative statements of what is happening are very clear in themselves. But you have to pay attention to literally every word, since they mean what they say very seriously. These people are social scientists.

Their main point is that education is the main determinant of peoples' health. And they show that this holds true even if you take into account occupation, income, and almost everything else imaginable. Going to school by itself makes a big difference in how healthy you are. They then show why this should be the case: schooling does two things for people. (1) It teaches them a wide array of concrete techniques for solving problems – for thinking about them in new ways, for conceptualizing new kinds of solutions, for seeing a variety of ways of approaching an issue. At the same time, in school one learns how to concretely, in a step-by-step fashion, set about to solve a problem in a rational way, without getting carried away by your emotions. (2) Secondly, in school one repeatedly has the experience of learning that one's own *actions* affect one's own *outcomes*. Making this connection between what you do and what you get is crucial for having a successful life in many respects, but particularly with regard to one's health. Health is primarily shaped by life style, not by medical care (they show this in detail); therefore, the crucial issue in how healthy you are is your willingness and ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Ross and Mirowsky argue all of this out in detail, demolish the competing theories, and present their conclusions in as clear a fashion as one could possibly want. This is astonishingly powerful as an example of what can be done using multivariate survey analysis. Don't be surprised if you find the book a bit dry – they aren't interested in being interesting, save on the power of the content they present. That's a lot.

Oct. 13 No Class (Papers due October 14, by 4:00 to Robin)

Oct. 20 *American Apartheid* by Doug Massey and Nancy Denton

- Read chapters 1, 4 – 6, skim the rest

Two important points should be noted with this book: First, it is an outstanding example of contemporary sociological research and analysis in the "social science" model. That is, it is an exceptionally rigorous piece of work, using both quantitative and qualitative research as well as careful logic to explore a complex, non-obvious, important topic. Massey and Denton, in this book, are explicitly engaged in an argument with William Julius Wilson, perhaps the preeminent scholar of contemporary urban black communities in America. Simply put, Wilson argues that the perpetuation of black urban poverty in America over the past forty years (since the Civil Rights movement)

results from the outflow of black professionals and middle-class businesspeople from the cities, leaving large pockets of concentrated poverty in the inner cities, which in turn produce a host of dysfunctional syndromes. Massey and Denton, contrariwise, argue that the outflow of middle-class blacks is exaggerated, and that it is the persistence of systematic residential segregation—actively pursued by whites—that creates the disastrous conditions of black ghettos in America. So, the first thing to notice is the substance of this argument. Second, you should notice the sophistication of the methodological and conceptual thinking in this book. *American Apartheid* received the 1991 American Sociological Association Book of the Year prize as the best sociology book published in the United States; it deserved that award. Rarely has such a range of intellectual techniques been brought to bear on a single topic. You don't need to scrutinize every one of their arguments; but try to follow through several of them at different points in the book to understand how precisely Massey and Denton are thinking about their topic. It's not always intrinsically interesting, but it is a marvelous model of social science thinking.

Oct. 27

Creating a Class by Mitchell L. Stevens

- Read entire book
- October 30 evening lecture (Required): "Is College Welfare?" 7:30 p.m., Chapel.

Mitchell Stevens was for some years a professor in the sociology department at Hamilton College; he is now a professor at NYU's Steinhardt School of Education, and in January will become a professor at Stanford University. The book is a beautifully written, easy-to-read, and engaging discussion of how students are admitted to schools such as Hamilton. Stevens will be speaking at Hamilton on the evening of October 30 at a lecture we will attend.

Nov. 03

Seductions of Crime by Jack Katz

- Read chapters 1, 2, 5 – 7

We're only going to read selections of this book, which is quite long and dense. Katz is a phenomenological sociologist working at UCLA, who specializes in this sort of detailed analysis of peoples' experience in emotionally challenging circumstances. He made his fame with this book, which is one of the most important recent works done in criminology. Essentially, Katz is trying to understand what it *feels* like to commit a crime, from the point of view of the criminal. What he realizes is that no one is forced to commit a crime, but all of the criminals he describes are "seduced" into doing it – that is, they create a situation in which they *want* to commit the crime.

Several of his frequently-used terms need definition. (1) When he says a crime is a “moral” act, he doesn’t mean it’s a good thing; he means it is enacted in the realm of morality, that is, the criminal is very much aware of doing a good or bad thing. The important distinction here is from saying that it’s an “instrumental” act, say, in order to make money. People commit crimes because they’re making a statement about good and evil, and they’re often playing with trying to do a little bit of bad or a lot of bad, or defending the Good, and so on. This is what he means by the “moral” position of the criminal. (2) Crime is “transcendent” for Katz in multiple senses of the word, which literally means “going beyond.” Crime “goes beyond” (or “transcends”) everyday life in many respects – it breaks the rules, it raises one to a new level of excitement, it takes the criminal out of the humdrum routine of his ordinary life, it goes beyond normal standards of decency, and so on. The “transcendence” of crime is, to Katz, a key element in its appeal; people are looking for an experience of the sacred, or the religious, and crime gives them that sort of feeling. It’s like doing something totally forbidden. That’s part of the appeal. (3) “Phenomenology”: by this Katz refers to the study of conscious experience. Phenomenologists are people who study the lived experience of human beings and try to figure out its structure. For instance: what does it feel like when we find something to be funny? What makes someone attractive? Phenomenologists deal with this sort of thing.

Katz is also wonderful at reconceptualizing crime, at breaking down the normal categories within which we see it. For instance, we tend to regard “murder” as a single kind of thing, in which one person kills another person deliberately. But Katz shows that there are at least two dramatically different kinds of murder – one in which the killer thinks he is doing good, the other in which the killer specifically wants to do bad. Many homicides, in fact, are an accidental result of a simple assault, in which the victim dies. Therefore, from the perspective of the criminal, the intention of an assault was the same as the intention of a murder – so why do we classify them as different crimes? Katz is also superb at untangling complex empirical relationships between causal factors such as race, gender, and class, showing in general how the causal analysis of crime really doesn’t work: most people who fit the categories most likely to commit certain crimes, in fact don’t commit them. There is a heavy element of choice involved in being a criminal, in other words.

TIPS FOR READING THE BOOK: every sentence in this book is worth reading, and will repay close reading, but don’t get bogged down on any particular sentence. You can learn a lot by studying any section closely. It’s best to find sections you think you understand and be sure to read them well than to suffer with sections you don’t understand at all. Katz is a very playful intellectual who throws out lots of “neat ideas” which he means quite seriously, but which can be enjoyed at the same time.

Nov. 10

The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell

- Read entire book

Malcolm Gladwell is a staff writer for the *New Yorker* magazine and is one of the best-known journalists in America, having authored two major best-sellers, *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*. Both are beautifully written presentations of findings of contemporary psychological and social science. This book includes within it much of what is interesting and important from the entire history of social psychology.

Nov. 17

The Bridge at the Edge of the World by James Gustave Speth

- Read from the beginning – p. 195

Gus Speth is the dean of the School of Forestry at Yale University and a major thinker and writer on environmental issues. This book is not social science as usually conceived, but is a remarkably comprehensive overview of the causes and effects of global climate change. We use it here in particular for its analysis of the impact that certain features of corporate capitalism have on the use of natural resources; but it's a fabulous book in many ways and deserves to be read.

Dec. 01

"E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century," (handout) by Robert Putnam

- December 2 evening discussion (Required)

The Putnam article raises important issues about the nature of diversity and community, and is written by a political scientist (Robert Putnam) best known for his book *Bowling Alone*. The evening discussion which is required will include students from a host of different courses across the College, many of them introductory level. You will probably be the advanced students in this discussion. We will talk more about this in class.

Dec. 08

No meeting Papers

Final papers due Thursday, December 11