Sociology 199b—DRAFT.11.2.15
Senior Capstone Seminar: Sociology and the World
Spring 2015

Brandeis University
Thur. 2 to 5
Pearlman 202
Office Hours: TBA

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Course Description

This course has several interrelated goals. First, and most generally, it provides an opportunity for graduating Sociology majors to engage in a shared capstone experience. While the flexibility and lack of prerequisites in the Sociology major has a number of benefits, one of its downsides is that nearly every department offering attracts a wide range of students, from advanced majors to those with zero prior experience with Sociology, making it difficult to assume any shared prior foundation. We hope that the opportunity to engage with fellow senior majors throughout the semester will provide occasion for different kinds of conversations about sociological phenomena.

Second, this course emphasizes the production as well as consumption of sociological knowledge, by focusing on practices and processes associated with social science research. Through a series of “under-the-hood” talks by faculty in the Brandeis Sociology Department, we will be able to learn the ways in which sociologists conduct and make use of their research. As such, our discussions and assignments will complement research experiences associated with Senior Honors Theses, Senior Research Papers, and the many independent and collaborative initiatives available across campus, while orienting us to the ways in which practicing sociologists engage with their craft.

Third, we will engage in a common research project in the community. At the beginning of the semester, by consulting with various people and organizations in Waltham, we will select an institution that could benefit from some well-executed sociological thinking and research. Collaboratively, we will undertake this public sociology project by identifying questions the organization may want to explore about its mission, its outreach program, its effectiveness. We will use whatever methods of data collection might address those issues (ranging from conducting in-person interviews, constructing an on-line survey, culling census data, mapping potential markets, identifying regulatory barriers and/or opportunities). At the end of term, as research teams we will make presentations to the organization about our findings and recommendations.
Finally, this Capstone Seminar will emphasize the relevance of sociological approaches and perspectives for interpreting media accounts of current events, participating in public exchanges over policies and programs, and mobilizing effective responses to issues of concern.

Much of our attention this semester thus will be devoted to the various ways in which a “sociological imagination” might creatively and effectively be deployed to these broader civic ends.

**Learning Goals:**

1. Develop a practical working definition of sociology.
2. Explore what it means to exercise a sociological imagination in civil society. Anticipate ways to build bridges from your education to your post-collegiate life.
3. Engage with faculty in the Department of Sociology and visiting scholars to discover how they practice their craft.
5. Inventory research and critical thinking skills, identify those you need, and develop and use them in hands-on research.
6. Engage collaboratively in an original research project that will be useful to a community organization. In effect, practice a kind of public sociology.
7. Communicate your research findings to your classmates and your newly identified “public.”

**Intellectual responsibility.** Academic integrity is the ground of trust that sustains a scholarly community. Please honor the words and thoughts of others and credit them faithfully. Whether you are submitting written work or speaking in class, take care to acknowledge your sources not only for the words you cite but for the ideas you advance. Sources include not only print but web materials, ideas you learned in other classes, and ideas gleaned from other students.

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

**Required Books**


New York Times (accessible online through Brandeis Scholar, or in print in the Goldfarb Library)

In addition articles (marked with an asterisk (*) below will be available on the LATTE course page: http://latte.brandeis.edu.

Recommended:

Course Requirements

- Participation — 15%
- 2 collaborative presentations on weekly readings — 20%
- Weekly media posts — 10%
- Class presentation: sociological take on current events — 10%
- Op-ed essay — 20%
- Applied research project — 25%

Students are expected to be full-fledged participants in the seminar. As this capstone seminar has been designed specifically to provide a space for us to collectively engage with how sociology might inform public issues and debates, much of the benefit of this course will come through in-class discussion. This means coming to class having carefully read and digested the readings. The course grade includes attendance and participation (15%). While our small seminar format will provide plenty of opportunities for in-class participation, we will also value conversations outside of class, including topics related to the Waltham research project and connections made between class topics, colloquium speaker presentations, and current events.

In addition, students will make two collaborative presentations on weekly readings, which will account for 20% of the grade. The presentation should include a brief synopsis of the argument, but most importantly point to thematic philosophical, methodological, and political themes in the reading. Presenters should prepare questions for class discussion and distribute them at least 24 hours before class.

Weekly media posts (10%). Beginning January 22, you will locate and post a link to a media account of a story that speaks to an issue that you see as sociologically interesting or otherwise important. While connecting with a wide variety of media sources is encouraged, our core source will be the New York Times. You should plan to at least scan headlines from the Times on most days of the week, and at least half of your posted weekly links should come from this
source. While you aren’t required to formally reflect on your post in writing, we will select 1-2 of these posts to discuss in class each week, so please be prepared to briefly summarize the basic thrust of your selected story as well as your take on why it is sociologically relevant and interesting. You will post these weekly links to a Latte forum. Note that your links should be posted no later than 8am each Thursday.

Class presentation: sociological take on current events (10%). Early in the semester, each of you will sign up for a presentation slot. On your assigned day, you will introduce an event or issue taken from the previous month’s news, providing descriptive background as well as a sociologically-informed analysis – i.e. a discussion that demonstrates how we might apply an established body of theory or line of prior empirical findings and frameworks to the issue, and/or advances at least one hypothesis informed by prior research to understand or predict the outcomes of your chosen event/issue. You should prepare a ten-minute presentation, which will be followed by an additional 10-15 minutes of open discussion. Note that it is fine if your event/issue is drawn from one of your – or your classmates’ – weekly media posts.

Each student will write an Op-ed essay (20%) designed to be paired with your in-class presentation, and will be due at the start of the class period in which you present. In 600-800 words, you should introduce and support a position on the event or issue at the center of your presentation. The format of this essay should roughly follow the op-ed models that we will discuss in class, and advance a clear, empirically-supported position supported by a sociologically-informed analysis intended to convince readers of the validity and utility of your argument.

Applied research project (25%). Early in the semester, in collaboration with other students and the professor, you will select and pursue a Waltham community project to explore, assess, and research. You will draw on existing social science research to inform the organization’s work and apply research skills to helping them interpret the evidence you gather. This project will culminate in a collaboratively written report of your research (8 to 10 pages) and a public presentation of your findings.

Course Outline

Week 1: January 15 – Introduction: Sociology and Academe

Week 2: January 22 – “The Promise” of Engaged Sociology
  - BEGIN Media posts—What is happening in the world?
  - Brainstorm research project possibilities
  - What is sociology?
• How is knowledge produced in the academy?
• How is the profession of sociology organized? (organizations, advocates, gatekeepers, practitioners—policy and service)

Dandaneau, Steven, Taking it Big (hereafter TIB), chapter 1
*W. Robert Conner, “Why Majors Matter”

Week 3: January 29 – Op-eds and Communicating to a Reading Public
• Media posts—What is happening in the world?
• Research Work Groups

2:00--Op-ed workshop

*Wendy Cadge, "Waiting for a Miracle? Perspectives from Health Care Providers." The
   Huffington Post. September 24, 2012

Week 4: February 5 – – Defining the Contours of Public Sociology
• Media posts—What is happening in the world?
• Research Work Groups

*Vincent Jeffries, “Redefining the Nature and Future of Sociology: Toward a Holistic Sociology” (Handbook of Public Sociology, pp. 1-23)
*Michael Burawoy, “The Public Sociology Wars” (Handbook of Public Sociology, pp. 449-473)

Week 5: February 12 -- Sociology and its Competing Missions
• Media posts—What is happening in the world?
• Research Work Groups
*Andrew Abbott, “Pragmatic Sociology and the Public Sphere,” Social Science History 34:3 (Fall 2010): 337-
Noval D. Glenn, “Some Suggested Standards for Distinguishing between Good and Bad Public Sociology” (Handbook of Public Sociology pp. 135-150)

Week 6: February 19-- NO CLASS, Winter Break

Week 7: February 26 – “Under the Hood” Perspectives on Research by Current Brandeis Sociologists—with David Cunningham (invited)
  - Research Work Groups

*David Cunningham, “Contemporary Victims of Creative Suffering”
http://blog.oup.com/2013/08/mlk-creative-suffering-today/

Week 8: March 5 – “Under the Hood”—with Laura Miller (invited)
  - Media posts—What is happening in the world?
  - Presentation on sociological take on current events
  - Research Work Groups


Week 9: March 12 – “The Promise” of Engaged Sociology
  - Media posts—What is happening in the world?
  - Presentation on sociological take on current events
  - Research Work Groups

Week 10: March 19 – Reciprocity and Obligation to Indigenous People and Oppressed Communities & “Under the Hood” —with Karen V. Hansen
  - Research Work Groups
Karen V. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*, Preface, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 7, 8, and Conclusion

*Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “How Scholarship Comes to be Relevant, or Dumbarton Oaks is Fifty Years Old,” and “America’s Oldest Racism: The Roots of Inequality,” Why I can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 129-141


**Recommended:**


*Rhoda Howard-Hassmann, “Public Sociology and Universal Human Rights” (Handbook of Public Sociology, pp. 357-373)

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**Week 11: March 26 – Sociologically Framing the World**

- Research Work Groups

Meet with Colloquium speaker

**Week 12: April 2 – “Under the Hood” – with Ana Villalobos and Carmen Sirianni (invited)**


**Week 13: April 9-- NO CLASS – Spring Break**

**Week 14: April 16 – Group Project Workshop**

**Week 15: April 23 – Presentations on Waltham Research Projects & Defining Our Sociological Practice of the Future**