

Contemporary American Society

Soc 3233

TTh 2:45-4:00

Calhoun 203

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Books:

Putnam, Robert. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Course Description:

The United States has the world's largest economy, with its most powerful military force. It is the second largest democracy, operating under the longest lasting system of continuous constitutional governance. It is the most diverse nation in world history, attracting immigrants from all parts of the globe. Since at least the end of the Second World War, the United States has played the leading role in the forging of transnational institutions, including the NATO strategic alliance; the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization; and the United Nations. Once the leading industrial producer in the world, the United States today sustains its economic dominance in the new centers of global wealth production, finance and technology. It is the leading exporter of cultural products to the world, from movies to pop songs to fast food restaurants. People all over the world recognize the profound influence of the United States in shaping the world they live in, for better or for worse.

Despite all these superlatives, there is today a widely shared sense that the United States is in crisis. The narrative of American "greatness" is being challenged from across the political spectrum; some yearn to return to an idealized past (make it "great again"); others see in that past only the legacy of terror, violence, and oppression. The founding ethos of abundance and opportunity, symbolized by the frontier, has given way to feelings of exhaustion, scarcity, and the looming terror of environmental catastrophe. Core institutions in American life no longer inspire the trust of the public, with problems appearing too

big to solve and divisions too fundamental to be resolved. Once widely touted as a beacon for the world, the American tradition of “liberal democracy” is increasingly viewed as decadent, corrupt, hypocritical and ineffectual, by both rival nations and a growing domestic constituency. The eye-popping American share of global wealth is accompanied by economic inequality far exceeding that of other Western democracies. In its high rates of gun ownership and violence, the United States more closely resembles a failed state, while its incarceration rate is higher even than that of the world’s authoritarian regimes. American life expectancy lags other prosperous nations, remarkably even posting a *decline* in the years immediately *preceding* the COVID pandemic. In the 2010’s, suicides, drug overdoses, and rates of mental illness all rose dramatically. Minority groups, particularly African Americans, disproportionately bear the hardships of poverty and discrimination, as well as being subjected to heightened levels of punitive social control. The promise embodied by the election of America’s first Black president is a fading memory, with racial conflict once again at the center of American political life. Political unrest, from mass protests to terrorist violence, has reached levels not seen since the 1960’s.

This course attempts to make sense of *how we got to* this point in American life. Thus, our investigation of *contemporary* American society will also involve a considerable amount of historical analysis. We will begin with the seismic economic transformations that have taken place since the postwar period: postindustrial society, globalization, the rise of tech and finance, and the politics of free markets. The mid-20th century was a period unprecedented economic equality and upward mobility, secured by the strength of the industrial sector and the “social contract” forged between corporations, organized labor and the government. The collapse of this economy prefigured durable new trends; accelerating inequality, the decline in working class wages, and the concentration of wealth in new power centers, particularly Silicon Valley and Wall Street. In place of the “New Deal order” that informed postwar governance, a new political environment, routinely called “neoliberalism,” asserts free-market primacy, weakening organized labor, economic regulation, and the social safety net. This new regime has abetted massive individual fortunes; nine of the ten richest people in the world are American citizens, all spawned by a tech sector that did not even exist before the late 20th century. For many others, the situation is one of growing anxiety and in some cases despair.

We will then dig into the role of institutions in shaping life outcomes, particularly the impact of family, schools, and the criminal justice system. For economically privileged Americans, family life is increasingly governed by the imperatives of education and its centrality to social class reproduction. As the importance of education has grown, its costs have soared, both in terms of the price tag and the pressures it places on families. Admission to the “highest value” institutions has become excruciatingly

competitive, demanding enormous investments of time and material resources. These resources in turn are distributed very unequally throughout the society. The highest achieving students have duly become both hyper-focused on academic success and increasingly cynical about its value beyond job market credentialing. On the other end of the spectrum, increases in the concentration of poverty are accompanied by both family instability and failing local institutions. The neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state has been accompanied by a punitive turn in poverty management, particularly in segregated Black communities. In these cases, the criminal justice system is now the most consequential institution shaping everyday life, even for those not directly caught in its net.

The remainder of the term will look at the problems of political polarization and social isolation. Culturally, politically, and geographically Americans continue to grow further apart. Topics include the terms of 21st century gun culture, the apocalyptic rhetoric of American decline among conservatives, the isolation of the American military from “mainstream” American life, and the rise of new “social justice” politics on the American left. While earlier we addressed the economic might of Silicon Valley, now we will dig deeper into the impact of new technology, particularly social media, on the quality and content of political and cultural discourse. We will conclude by considering social intimacy and interpersonal trust in the 21st century. Loneliness and despair have become epidemic, with terrible consequences for both individual well-being and political stability.

Whew. Bleak. Things seem bleak. Hopefully we can think about ways, collectively and individually, to not feel defeated in the face of these challenges.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and Participation: I expect that students are *committed* to regularly attend class and *actively* participate. This does not mean speaking in every class. It does mean being prepared and attentive to lecture and to each other. I will not regularly take roll, and I assume that if you miss class, you have a good reason (since you are committed). I do not need documentation or even an excuse. If your absences become excessive, I will notice, and by the first midterm if I do not know who you are, the problem is you. I would like everyone to feel empowered to ask questions and to offer their insights during class time. I am very open to being challenged in class, and to students expressing disagreement with one another about what, after all, are contentious issues. I also expect that this will take place in a respectful and collegial manner.

Office Hours: All students are strongly encouraged to use office hours as a resource. I consider this a form of active participation, and if you are disposed towards being quiet in class, this is a very good way to get my attention and personal support. Access to your professors is a perk of elite private universities, and I encourage you to take advantage of it in all your courses.

At the moment, our regular sociology offices are being renovated. Given this, I am doing office hours by appointment this term, and we can arrange to meet either in my temporary office at the Center Building, or somewhere convenient on the main campus.

Current Event Assignments:

Our course topics illuminate issues that daily impact the world we live in. Every week, things we are reading about will relate to new events hitting the news cycle. I would like you to stay on top of the news, in general, and to turn in a total of eight Current Event reports over the course of the term. These require that you 1. Briefly summarize the content of the article, 2. *Explicitly* show its relevance to specific readings in the course, 3. Analyze the connection, including offering your own understanding of that relationship. Is this event consistent with arguments our authors make, or contradictory? This is further an opportunity to interject your own viewpoints, as informed by the give and take of our class experience.

It is very important in this course to make connections, and to use critical and creative thinking while doing so. That is the major goal of this assignment, and it is in many ways the most interesting and instructive part of the course. As much as possible, I try to read and respond to Current Events personally. They alert me to things I had not seen or considered, and allow me to keep track of where you are and how you are thinking. Often current events provide valuable input for our discussions, by helping us tie the readings in class to what is happening now!

Turning in Current Events: Current events are submitted on Brightspace, at any point during the week (from Monday to Sunday). **Only one current event will be accepted per week.** During weeks that exams are **due**, no current events will be accepted. You can skip up to four weeks without penalty.

Please read this part carefully: I have narrow expectations on the sources you may use for the current events. In the opening classes, we will discuss the reasoning for this; suffice to say here that it is no longer controversial to observe that the Internet has lots of unreliable material floating around. So, you

are required to stick to sources from the “legacy” media – that is *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Tennessean* and other **major metropolitan newspapers**. These sources are not perfect models of objectivity, because nothing is, but they do strive to be accountable to certain codified journalistic standards. Identifying their latent or manifest biases in your report is perfectly appropriate.

Perhaps you will stumble across a perfect article on a platform outside my very restricted expectations and will want to know if you can use it. **The answer is no.**

Also, restrict the articles to “straight” news reporting. Do not use opinion pieces. This part can be particularly tricky. A lot of what gets shared on Facebook and Twitter comes from the opinion sections, because a strong point of view is more interesting and click-baity. Very often those pieces are awesome, and I read them like crazy, and agree or argue with the author in my head. However, in this assignment, it is you who is the opinion writer, bringing to bear your hard earned knowledge and critical acumen on an item from the news cycle, and so I’d like you to use as raw material articles that stick to “just the facts” reporting. All journalism displays the values of the writers and editors, even if only in deeming some things newsworthy and others not. Nonetheless try to use pieces that are less overt in taking a position on what is covered.

I have another expectation that is difficult to enforce, but which will lead to much better results. Resist the urge to use a search engine of any kind. Instead bookmark the *home pages* of several papers and scan through the headlines for likely candidates to analyze. Generally, the layout of the homepage makes clear which pieces are opinion (or sometimes analysis) as opposed to “news,” so this will help you avoid inappropriate articles. Also, you will imbibe, if only in a cursory way, extra information about what is happening in the world, which can’t be the worst thing. Most importantly, by not using a search term you will make more interesting and creative connections than otherwise, and everyone wants to be creative and interesting. When people type a topic into Google news or even a newspaper’s search tab on the homepage, it narrows the range of what one will consider, and also runs into trouble because the algorithms almost always favor the stuff I want you to stay away from.

Midterm Exams: There are two scheduled take-home examinations, comprised of **two comprehensive essay questions**. Answers to each question are expected to be three to **five typed, double-spaced pages (12 point font)**, for a total of six to ten pages in the total exam. Exams will test on the course readings in-class discussions. The criteria by which essay exams will be graded include demonstration of mastery

of the required readings and classroom discussion; factual accuracy; depth and breadth of explanations; clarity; creativity; critical appraisal of ideas; and originality. Exam questions will typically ask for you to make connections among several course readings, a skill that will be modelled and practiced in the lectures, discussions and current events. The main point of an exam is to demonstrate your understanding of the readings and their arguments, so while it demands creativity and insight in making appropriate connections and curating the source material, your personal opinions are less relevant than your understanding of others' arguments here. I do value your opinions, just the proper forum for expressing them is in current events, class discussion and office hours.

You are expected to do your own work on the exams, and not consult with classmates or test files or Artificial Intelligence programs. I will not address issues of content in office hours once the exam has been distributed. I will be perhaps more willing to answer questions in class where everyone has a fair shot to benefit. There is one exception as far as outside assistance. Students can use the Writing Studio as a resource for help organizing the essay and stating points clearly. This is recommended. Writing is important; if the test is unclear, we will not give the benefit of the doubt. Clear thinking and clear writing go together.

Late Exams: Midterms are expected to be turned in at the beginning of class on the days that they are due. Anything afterwards counts as a late exam. **Late exams will be downgraded 10 pts, or approximately one letter grade, *for every class period* they are late.**

Final Exam: The final exam is taken in class. Blue books are provided, and can taken on either the regular or alternate exam dates.

Honor Code: The honor code applies to all class activities, from current events to exams. Any cases of suspected misconduct will be referred to the Honor Council without exception.

Grading Breakdown:

Attendance/Participation: 10%

Current Events: 10%

Midterms: 30% each

Final Exam: 20%

Schedule of Readings:

Aug. 24: Intro

Aug: 29-Aug 31: Who is America?

George Packer, "How America Split into Four Parts"

Part One: Political Economy

Sept. 5-7: Postindustrial America

Steven Greenhouse, "The Rise and Fall of the Social Contract"; Jonathan Mahler, "GM, Detroit and the Fall of the Black Middle Class"

Sept. 13-15: Free America

Zachary Carter, "The End of Friedmanomics"

Sept. 20-22: Smart America

Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* Ch. 1-5, 9-10; Paul Starr, "How Neoliberal Policy Shaped the Internet"

Sept. 27-29: The Digital Cage

Evan Osnos, "Can Mark Zuckerberg Fix Facebook Before it Breaks America?"; Charles Duhigg, "Is Amazon Unstoppable?"; Scott Galloway, "America's False Idols"

Oct. 3: Midterm Review

Midterm One handed out

Part Two: Institutions and Social Class Reproduction

Oct. 5: Social Mobility

Robert Putnam, *Our Kids* Ch. 1

Oct. 10-12: Family Life and Social Inequality

Robert Putnam, *Our Kids* Ch. 2-4

Midterm Two due October 10

Oct. 17: The Chosen

Caitlin Flanagan, "The Ivy Illusion"

Oct. 24: Local Communities

Putnam Ch. 5

Oct. 26: Social Isolation and Social Control

Alice Goffman, *On the Run* Intro, Ch. 1

Oct. 31- Nov. 2: Race and Gender in "Occupied America"

Goffman Ch. 3-5; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Gangsters of Ferguson"

Nov. 7: Midterm Review

Midterm Two handed out

Part Three: Battle Lines

Nov. 9: Apocalypse Now

Robert Jones, "The Eclipse of White Christian America"; Mus, "The Flight 97 Election"

Nov. 14-16: The Police and the "Patriots"

"Kyle Rittenhouse: American Vigilante"; Adam Serwer, "The Authoritarian Instincts of the Police Unions"; James Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military"

Midterm Two due Nov. 14

Nov. 28: The Crack-up

Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past Ten Years of American Life Have been Uniquely Stupid”

Nov. 30: Punishing

Andrew Marantz, “Trolls for Trump”; Podcast: “Invisibilia: The Callout”

Dec. 5-7: Intimacy Issues

Kate Julian, “Why are Young People Having So Little Sex?”; Andrew Sullivan, “The Poison We Pick”