THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociologist C. Wright Mills described “the sociological imagination,” as that quality of mind with the ability to grasp the interplay of biography and history, of self and social structure, of private troubles and public issues. This capstone seminar will help each of us to see how the sociological imagination manifests itself in some of the most highly acclaimed (and cutting-edge) sociological works over the last eight years and to apply it to individual lives (including our own), against the backdrop of historical and current world events. This capstone course will also assist us in developing critical understandings of sociological work, as well our own culpability in the creation and the reification of social problems.

So while there is no substantive focus, per se, our goal is quite literally the cultivation of “the sociological imagination.” We will however, be dealing with a number of broad ranging subject matters, including the nature of informal social control, gendered work at the lower ends of the socio-economic class structure, and the social construction of motherhood.

Satisfies the Culminating Experience for the Sociology Major.

Course Requirements:

Class Participation – 10% of your course grade

This will be an intensive working seminar, which means that everyone is expected to attend regularly and come to engage, actively and critically, in a discussion of the assigned readings. In the words of Professor King, “critical engagement necessitates bringing to bear all the theoretical, methodological, and analytical prowess in sociology that you have acquired.” You are required to class with comments, questions, critiques of the assigned readings (not just summaries), as well as relevant (or complementary) examples from other research and current events.

Note: perfect attendance and answering questions only will get you a C. In order to move beyond average, you must be proactive. If you suffer from debilitating shyness, you should come see me before the second week of class.

I will send you an assessment of your class participation grade approximately halfway through the term, just to make sure there are no surprises.
If it becomes clear that you are not keeping up with the reading, I will implement daily quizzes and mandatory critical questions to be turned in the night before the assigned reading is due. Hopefully, it won’t come to that.

Class facilitations – 10%

In addition to general participation, groups of three students will assume responsibility for initiating and leading the discussion for one of the books in its entirety. Class discussants will need to meet with me prior to the class that they are scheduled to facilitate so that we can discuss the angle on which they plan to focus the class discussion. Class discussants will need to have read the material carefully, to have identified the unifying themes or points within the assigned reading, and are encouraged to bring in outside material (newspaper articles, complementary studies, or video clips) that will facilitate a deeper understanding of the material. If you show videos, you must be able to get the class to draw linkages between the reading and its cultural representation.

Also, for your facilitations, please be aware that sometimes it takes some time before people respond to a question – there may be a “warming up” period before the discussion gets going. Be certain to give some time to each question, and don’t just quickly move onto the next question if the responses are slow in coming.

“So, what do you guys think about…?” is not an appropriate question. Ever. So don’t ask it.

Biographical Sketches – 10% of your class participation grade

Individual students (in separate presentations) will also be asked to present a biographical sketch of someone whose lives they believe reflect either a grasp of the sociological imagination or whose lives can be better understood via the sociological imagination and why; these presentations must include some discussion of the broader social and historical context in which that person (or persons) was situated and the degree to which his or her “personal troubles” were or, perhaps could be, linked to “public issues.”

Students who wish to work together may come see me; however, doing so will raise my overall expectations for your presentation. You must have your person “approved” by me prior to the assignment.

A few notes on Biographical Sketches: Grades for discussion facilitation and presentations will be assigned based on assessments provided by myself, as well as your peers.

These presentations, if done well, are typically interesting and informative. Again, these are scheduled in the middle of the term to help you with the formulation of your final project. Past presentations have featured such diverse subjects as J.K. Rowling, Bob
Marley, Paul Newman, Elizabeth Glaser, Oprah Winfrey, Lance Armstrong, Barak Obama, George W. Bush, etc.

Short and sweet is the key. In fact, we will be adopting a very stylized approach to giving Powerpoint Presentations. This will serve two functions: make sure everyone gets done over the course of two class periods and teaching you how to use Powerpoint in a very efficient and informative manner. Students last term said that they wished they had known about this method before and believed that it would be very helpful for them in the future! I tried it again with my first year seminar and they loved it!

**Daily Response Papers and Critical Questions**—30% of your grade

You essentially have a **2-page paper (2 pages, single sided or 1 page double-sided, 1.5 line spacing and 12 pt font)** due every day that there is substantive reading. These assignments are designed to make sure that you have something to contribute to class and so that I can see what you’re getting out of the reading, prior to class discussion. These are intended to be response papers, where you raise critical concerns that you have about the reading or juxtapose the reading against broader sociological concepts either that we have talked about or that you have come across in you other classes.

The last sentence or two of a paper should be dedicated to raising at least one critical question. A critical question must indicate that you understand the reading, and that you are engaging the argument.

Questions that actually critique the reading and have the potential to generate discussion will be viewed more positively than those that do not.

These are not busy work; note that at any point, it is within the facilitators’ right to ask students to ask their questions in class. In class, I encourage facilitators to invoke this right if it appears that their classmates are not fully engaged.

You may write blog posts in response to Mills instead of writing formal papers. These may be posted at any time during the first week. It is in your best interest going forward to make these two as detailed as possible regarding Mills’ vision of the sociological imagination as both a practice and as a tool.

You are not required to turn in a daily response on the book that you are facilitating.

Papers will be graded in a check plus, check, check minus fashion. A check plus means that you have effectively illustrated your understanding of the material and have been critical in your interpretation of it (that is, you’ve been able to move beyond it in some some meaningful way). A check paper means that it’s obvious that you’ve read it, but not much more. A check minus means that you have not effectively illustrated that 1) you’ve read or 2) thought about it above and beyond trying to complete the work on time.
If you have questions about why you’re receiving a check versus a check plus, please make arrangements to see me to discuss. If you know why you received a check, as opposed to a check plus, there’s no need to come see me.

Papers that contain multiple grammatical errors or are written poorly will be returned to you ungraded; you may resubmit these for a grade of check minus, in order to avoid getting a 0.

**Late papers will not be accepted; if you miss class (or need to miss class) for any reason, you may turn in your assignments early.**

Again, these papers are not simply busy work; it is one of the goals of this class for you to be critical consumers of what you read and to be able to pose sociologically relevant questions.

In sum, these assignments should illustrate your understanding of the assigned reading for the day – in its entirety. It will be very clear if you’ve only read the first two pages! In other words, do not center your thoughts on a single footnote! Make it about the big picture.

**Maintenance of an Intellectual Blog – 10% of your grade**

Your blog should record your observations, questions, news items, resources, notes, artifacts, etc., related to the sociological analysis of gender, sexuality, work, health, or any other substantive issue that you encounter in the course of the winter quarter that reflects or can be related to the sociological imagination.

The blog should begin with an essay on your sociological interests – your intellectual biography, if you will. You should reflect upon why you’re interested in sociology, what it means for you to be a sociologist, and how you plan to use sociology as you move on to the next phase of your life. Your initial entry should be at least 2-3 pages in length.

You should make two entries per week (at least 300 words each).

I, along with two other students chosen randomly, will grade your blog using the following criteria: 1) Quantity (Do you have at least 18 entries?), 2) Relevant (Are they sociologically relevant?), 3) Quality (Are they well written and do they further our collective understanding of sociology in the world or of the Sociological Imagination?), 4) Interesting (Are they interesting and/or thought provoking?).

I highly recommend that you read other students’ blogs and comment on them. Although it’s a little hard to keep track of comments, I will consider comments on others’ blogs as part of class participation.

You may also want to use your blog as a research file, ala Mills.
Final Project – A Sociologically Informed Autobiography – 30% of your grade

As all good sociology majors know, less than half of the American public ever attends college and less than a quarter actually finish; these numbers, of course, vary by sex, gender, race, ethnicity, region of the country, etc.

As you are about to leave Dartmouth and embark on the next phase of your lives, it may be useful for you to contemplate your own biography within the framework of the sociological imagination.

In order to do this you must 1) sketch out your own biographical history (including, but not limited to your position in various social structures; 2) identify the characteristics of your proximal conditions that led you to where you are today and shaped who you will be tomorrow; and 3) any personal choices or sacrifices that you have made that may have led you off the “expected” path. In addition to thinking about structures in terms of socio-economic status, father’s occupational position, race, ethnicity, or gender, you must also consider how “culture,” “place,” “time” and “history” also affected your life chances.

As we proceed through the course, I will be introducing you to various types of structures that you may want/need to consider. I will also expect you to consult the sociological literature on educational attainment, class mobility, the reproduction of status, and the relationship between structure and agency, etc. –or any other that is relevant to the focus of your paper.

While an adequate answer will situate you locally, an exemplary one will also take into consideration the broader (global) implications of what it means to be a citizen (or resident) of one of the most economically developed nations in the world.

While this may seem like a daunting task, it is merely one that requires imagination and the ability to bring your sociological eye to bear on your own life. Everything in our lives can be understood more fully using a sociological lens. Past students have written papers that have included the following:

1. A young woman’s experience in a magnet school system that changed her educational and, thus, class trajectory.
2. A girl’s decision to put dreadlocks in their hair, following a traumatic experience.
3. A young women’s experience growing up white in a non-white culture and her participation in a historically non-white, male dominated male sport.
4. A young athlete’s realization of her sexuality and her decision to remain in the closet.
5. A young man’s perspective on his parent’s divorce.
6. The death rituals of a family who live with death instead of hide from it—caring for the dying and attending to the death at home rather than sending loved ones to nursing homes or hospitals.
Deadlines for the paper are embedded in the syllabus. You must turn in these preliminary assignments; they are designed to keep you on track. Although they will not be graded, as such, **they are required.** You will receive feedback on them. **If you do not turn them in, it will not be possible to receive higher than a B on your final paper.**

**Policies:**

I am not your mother, nor are you my children. Thus, I will not monitor you or nag you about doing your assignments. If you don’t do them, you don’t do them. I understand that you have other commitments and priorities. Part of being in college is learning how to manage competing priorities. However, there are consequences.

In return for this, you will not ask for extensions, offer excuses, or plea bargain for grades, points, etc.

I do not change grades, because grades are relative in courses like this and if I were to change yours, I would essentially have to change everyone else’s in order to be fair, which would essentially invalidate the change that you’re requesting.

And, finally, if you don’t come to class, turn in an assignment, etc, that’s your business. I will not take it personally. I will not get mad. And I will not “not like” you.

We’re all adults. Deal?

**Attendance**

- It is to your advantage to get to class because: 1) active participation is important to your grade (and it is necessary to be in class to participate), and 2) information gleaned from mini-lectures and discussions will be designed to help you in subsequent papers and writing assignments.

- Having said that, however, I understand that some absences are unavoidable. Therefore, missing more than three class periods, **regardless of the reason,** will result in a lowering of your final grade by 5%. Furthermore, each additional day’s absence will result in additional 5% deduction. In other words, if you miss 4 days of class, you will face a 10% reduction in your final grade. You are also responsible for handing in your typed comment questions (in total for the days missed) upon your return to class.

**Papers**

- Use citations when you are quoting or borrowing from the work of others. Any literature you cite or quote should be properly and consistently referenced. See the quote below from the Academic Honor Principle.

- I will not accept late papers, period. Please remember that printers are most likely to fail when you are in a hurry, so do not be in a hurry.
• Though I should not have to specify this at this point in the game, writing matters! I know that everyone is pressed for time, but you must read your work (off the printed page) before you turn it in! You’d be surprised how many mistakes you miss when just glancing across the screen. If it appears to me that you have not read your paper before turning it in or the writing is sufficiently bad, it will be returned to you, ungraded.

• For help with your writing, visit the Composition Center. Call 6-3525, visit 108 Sanborn to make a free appointment, or get additional information about the Center and college writing at: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~compose. (I can also meet with you individually.)

• Unlike most courses you may have had up until this point, I encourage you to work together on your substantive papers. This does not mean that you may turn in joint assignments. Rather, I encourage you to discuss the books with your classmates before you write your individual papers. You must, however, give credit where credit is due. If you work together, you must identify the other students in the class with whom you have worked.

Intellectual Blogs and Papers
• Your intellectual blogs will be graded the last day of classes. Posts after March 8th will not be considered as part of your grade. Your final paper is due March 15th at noon (either in my office or via blitz; again, late papers will not be accepted, period).

Cheating and Plagiarism

• In the words of Professor Lewis, “do not cheat, do not plagiarize; follow the honor code and your own internal moral compass. Do not be afraid to talk to me if you have any questions about this issue.”

“A number of actions are specifically prohibited by the Academic Honor Principle. These focus on plagiarism and on academic dishonesty in the taking of examinations, the writing of papers, the use of the same work in more than one course, and unauthorized collaboration.” …

“Any form of plagiarism violates the Academic Honor Principle. Plagiarism is defined as the submission or presentation of work, in any form, that is not a student’s own, without acknowledgment of the source. With specific regard to papers, a simple rule dictates when it is necessary to acknowledge sources. If a student obtains information or ideas from an outside source, that source must be acknowledged. Another rule to follow is that any direct quotations must be placed in quotation marks, and the source immediately cited. Students are responsible for the information concerning plagiarism found in Sources: Their Use and Acknowledgment, available in the Dean’s Offices and at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sources.”

** Students with learning, physical or psychiatric disabilities who will be taking this course and may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to
make an appointment to see me as soon as possible, and by the end of the second week of classes. Also, contact the Academic Skills Center, 6-2014, asc@dartmouth.edu, 301 Collis Center to register for support services.**

Required Texts


*Required texts are available at Wheelock Books and the Dartmouth Bookstore and are on reserve at the library. If additional readings are to be assigned, they will be available on Blackboard.*

*Tentative Reading and Discussion Schedule.*

**Week One – Introduction & The Sociological Imagination**

January 8 – The Sociological Imagination (Substantive Blog post on the reading).

Reading: Mills, Chapters 1 & Appendix

January 10 – The Sociological Imagination (Substantive Blog post on the reading)

Reading: Mills, Chapters 7 - 10

*(this is not an easy read; do not put it off to the last minute or it won’t get done).*

**Week Two – Privilege (Class and Education)**

January 15 – School Shootings
Reading: Newman, Preface, Chapters 1 – 3

January 16 (x-hour): Newman, Chapters 4-7

January 17 – School Shootings,

Reading, Newman, Chapters 8 – 11, Epilogue

**Week Three – The Sociological Imagination (In Practice)**

January 21 – Martin Luther King, Keynote Address (Monday – Mandatory)

January 22 – No Classes (see above)

January 23 – X-Hour (see below)

January 24 – No Classes (see below)

During this week, I want you to attend three “official” MLK Celebration Events and write about them in your journals (2 to 3 pages each), one of which is the KeyNote Address on Monday the 21st). In what ways do they attempt to capture the sociological imagination? Do they succeed?

Your entries should be detailed enough to illustrate that you were there and that you actually gave it some thought. Tie the content of the presentations to the reading and ideas discussed in class, thus far.

These should be formal, content-based events, such as talks, plays, films, panel discussions, etc. Informal events, parties, etc., while I encourage you to attend, are not acceptable for this assignment.

DURING THIS WEEK YOU WILL ALSO MEET WITH ME DURING THE REGULARLY SCHEDULED CLASS TIMES AND/OR X-Hour REGARDING YOUR FINAL PAPER; this assignment is trickier than you might imagine, so come prepared. I will post your appt time on blackboard. If you cannot make it, it is up to you to switch with someone in the class.

**Week Four – Social Networks**

January 29 – Social Networks

Reading: Small, Parts 1 & 2**

Submit two to three names of people whose life you believe represents the sociological imagination (or could be better understood via the sociological imagination) for your
biographical sketch later in the term. For all of our sanity, please do not choose Barack Obama or Mitt Romney!

January 31 – Social Networks
Reading: Small, Parts 3 & 4 and Appendices A-C**

**WEEK 5 – Race and Sexuality**

February 5 – Race and Sexuality
Reading: Moore, Introduction & Chapters 1-3**

February 6 X-Hour – Berger, Chapter 3 (Available on Blackboard)
Small group work – At some point this week meet with your mastermind group to brainstorm your final project; please submit evaluations of your fellow master minders’ preparedness and usefulness. (Given the brevity of the term, you will need to meet on your own time – it is up to you and your group members to get this scheduled).

February 7 – Race and Sexuality**
Reading: Moore Chapter 4-6 & Conclusion

**WEEK 6 – Biographical Sketches**

February 12 – Biographical Sketches

*Hand in your two-page proposal for your final project:
This should include your topic, at least five sources, a potential data source, and a rough sketch of what you plan to cover and how it illustrates the Sociological Imagination, both methodologically and theoretically!!!*

February 13 - Biographical Sketches
February 14 – Biographical Sketches

**Week SEVEN – Education and Race**

February 19 – Education and Race
Reading: Tyson, Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2**
February 21 – Education and Race  
Reading: Tyson, Chapters 3 & 4 & Conclusion**

Week Eight – Education and Inequality

February 26 – Becoming an Elite
Reading: Kahn, Introduction & Chapters 1-2**

Expanded proposal for final paper – due in class (7 pages, including 10 academic sources)

February 28 – Becoming and Elite
Reading: Kahn, Chapters 3 – Conclusion **

Week 9 – Class Presentations

March 5 – Final Project Update (10 minutes each)
March 6 – Final Project Update (10 minutes each)
March 7 – Final Project Update (10 minutes each) and final wrap up.

You are expected to present your main ideas to the class, providing as much information as you feel comfortable sharing. The point is not to fully disclose, but to get feedback from your classmates that might help you in contextualizing your experiences. Keep this part of the assignment in mind when selecting your topic!!!!

Intellectual Blog – Final Entry (March 8th)

Final Project Due: March 15, noon. (Late papers will not be accepted).
Assessments of Student Blogs: March 15, noon (Late assessments will not be accepted and will detract from your class participation grade).

Important Dates
January 15th 1st response page paper and critical questions due in class.
January 21th Martin Luther King, Jr. Keynote Address 7:00 p.m.
January 22th No formal class – Attend MLK events and see me.
January 24th No formal class – Attend MLK events and see me.
January 29th Submit a list of 2 or 3 people for your biographical sketch with justification, for approval.
February 6th Mandatory X-Hour (and small group work on your own time).
February 12th  
2-page proposal for your final paper, including proposed theoretical frame, how you plan to contextualize your life historically, and two potential sources of data that you plan to use in order to do this. Also turn in evaluations of your master minders.

February 12-14th  
Biographical Sketches

February 26th  
Expanded proposal for final project, including a bibliography of 15 sources (which can include memoirs, magazine articles, etc., but must include scholarly books and articles) to be used in your final paper due.

March 5th -7th  
Final Paper Presentations (in process)

March 8th  
Final day for Blog Entries

March 15th  
Final Paper Due, Silsby 102 or Blitz, noon. Assessments of Student Blogs due at this time as well.

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**Statements Regarding the Sociological Imagination**


"Herein lies the fundamental theme of sociology: that everyday social life--our thoughts, actions, feelings, decisions, interactions, and so on--is the product of a complex interplay between societal forces and personal characteristics. In order to explain why people are the way they are, we must understand the social, historical, cultural, and organizational environments they inhabit. Neither individuals nor society can be understood without understanding both."

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)

"It is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society."

Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (1963)

"The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all of our lives. ... It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this--things are not what they seem. People who like to avoid shocking discoveries ... should stay away from sociology."
Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

"[Humans] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."