

Abbreviated Syllabus

Department of Sociology  
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN MODERN SOCIETIES**

Fall 2008

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*Course Information:*

Course Number:	SOCI 113	Instructor:	Professor David Warner
Credits:	3 Hours	Office:	Mather Memorial 223C
Lecture Times:	T, Th 10:00-11:15 am	Phone:	216.368.2697
Lecture Room:		E-mail:	david.warner [at] case.edu
Prerequisites:	None	Office Hours:	T, Th 1:15-2:15 and by appointment

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***COURSE DESCRIPTION:***

Modern societies are dealing with a number of complex issues that undermine the well-being of some (or all) of their members. Not all social issues, however, are considered social “problems.” Even when a social issue is deemed problematic, there is substantial debate as to the causes of and solutions to the problem.

In this course, we will use a social-constructionist approach to understand how society defines (or “frames”) social issues as undesirable social problems in need of change. Specifically, we will focus on the role of politics in defining social problems as we examine a number of issues facing modern societies, including gender inequality, racism, retirement, immigration, juvenile justice, and genocide. We will explore what different political perspectives view as the causes and consequences of each social problem, and how these differences result in divergent policy solutions. Although we will focus our attention largely on the United States, we will draw on the experiences of other nations to understand better the importance of the U.S. political discourse for framing social problems.

***COURSE OBJECTIVES:***

Students successfully completing this course will:

- Define what social problems are and give examples of social problems in modern societies;
- Describe how social issues are defined politically and framed in public discourse as social problems;
- Understand diverse political—radical-right, conservative, moderate, liberal, and radical-left—solutions to alleviate social problems;
- Cultivate one’s *sociological imagination*, understanding how personal troubles become public issues;
- Work towards becoming informed, politically active and engaged citizens;
- Further develop critical thinking, oral- and written-communication abilities.

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### ***COURSE FORMAT:***

As outlined at the end of the syllabus, this course is divided into three units. Unit 1 will cover social inequality as the foundation of social problems, Unit 2 will examine problems associated with the major social institutions, and Unit 3 will explore social problems associated with globalization and urbanization. Within each unit, we will cover a new social issue each week with a general overview of the topic followed by the examination of one particular social problem in detail. These in-depth examinations will use documentary films, in combination with select short articles from scholarly and popular media sources, to analyze how a social issue is framed as a problem by political discourse. I expect that students will be active participants in the learning process each class session, engaging in thoughtful discussion of the topics presented (See *Course Requirements* below). To facilitate this participation, I reserve the right to call on students during class.

### ***REQUIRED TEXTBOOK AND SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS:***

There is one required textbook for this course, available for purchase at the Case Western Reserve Bookstore (Thwing Center, 11111 Euclid Ave.):

**Macionis, John J. 2008. *Social Problems* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc. ISBN: 978-0-13-243339-6**

In addition to the textbook, students are also required to read several *short* scholarly articles, newspaper editorials and periodical opinion pieces, which I have made available via the Course Blackboard Site.

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### ***COURSE REQUIREMENTS:***

Students successfully completing this course will carefully integrate the course material and not simply memorize “facts.” This emphasis may be different from other courses with which you are familiar, and is one of the challenges of this course. In this end, I will use the following methods of evaluation to measure careful integration and analysis of the course material.

#### 1) Class Participation and Assigned Readings:

Each class session has a set of readings matched to it. You should complete these readings before the class session for which they are assigned, as they will allow you to participate in the lesson. Students are expected to demonstrate their proficiency with the readings through class participation. I will monitor and record students’ participation in class activities and assess the overall quality of participation at the end of the semester. Students with *regular* and *relevant* participation will receive the maximum credit.

#### 2) Short Quizzes:

At least eight (8) short quizzes will be administered at random throughout the semester. These quizzes will consist of 10 multiple choice/short answer questions drawn from the assigned readings on the topic being covered at the time the exercise is announced. The scores of your six (6) highest-scoring quizzes will be used in the calculation of your final grade. As you are allowed to miss two of these quizzes without penalty, no make-up assignments will be given. *No exceptions.*

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### 3) Critical Analysis Papers

You will complete three Critical Analysis Papers during the course of the semester—one for each Unit of the course. In 3-5 pages, you will *critically* examine one of the social problems we covered in-depth in the course. Your analysis of the social problem will center on the documentary film viewed in-class for the problem you select. You will use the assigned readings and *three* additional popular media articles to analyze how this social issue is defined as a social problem, and what this discourse means for the development of political solutions to this problem. The Unit 1 paper is due at the start of class on **Tuesday, September 30<sup>th</sup>** and the Unit 2 paper is due at the start of class on **Tuesday, November 11<sup>th</sup>**. The Unit 3 paper is due no later than **12:30 p.m.** on **Tuesday, December 16<sup>th</sup>** and must be turned in to the Sociology Department Main Office (201 Mather Memorial).

More detailed instructions on the content and format of the Critical Analysis Papers will be distributed in the second week of the course.