

Department of Sociology
Emory University
Spring 2013
MWF, 10:40-11:30; Few 131

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SOC 190/Freshman Seminar What Makes America Special?

Description

Americans have long thought that their country is special – distinctive in its traditions and institutions, dedicated to its own creed and culture. The idea that America stands out in the world is called American exceptionalism. But what makes America an exception? How can we tell? Why do some people now question the idea? And if America once was exceptional, will it remain so in a globalizing world? This course answers such questions by examining how American institutions work and how they differ from those in other countries. As a partial framework, we will use the ideas of a famous visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, whose classic *Democracy in America* is still instructive. We will study a mix of materials, drawn from various social sciences but including a fair amount of history. As we take a closer look at a wide range of American institutions, from religion via sports to the military, we will

1. Illustrate the way Americans do x (worship, play, use force, etc.)
2. Describe and explain how Americans do x in their own way
3. Compare the way Americans do x with foreign counterparts
4. Study the impact of how Americans do x on the rest of the world

Format

This course will blend different formats.

1. **Regular sessions.** Many regular sessions will feature a mixture of some lecturing, brief presentations, and informal discussion and debate. They require your active participation, a key ingredient of successful seminars. For some classes, I will designate discussion leaders, responsible for raising questions (or answering study questions) about readings.
2. **Debates.** In addition to informal argument, we will also have two formal team debates, based on prior research. You will get guidelines.
3. **Presentations.** Near the beginning and the end of the semester, you will have the opportunity to present a piece of research. I will also ask you to present highlights of one or two readings. You will get guidelines.

Goals

By taking this class, you will

- gain deeper knowledge of American society
- learn to think in new ways about issues in current public debate
- get introduced to topics worthy of further study in future courses
- develop your academic skills (analysis, writing, oral presentation)

Readings

- Peter Schuck and James Wilson (eds.), *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*
- Online readings, including some draft materials by the instructor (posted on Blackboard)

Note: the overall reading load is likely to be somewhat heavier than in other Freshman Seminars

Requirements

1. **Midterm and final exam**, each worth 30% of your final grade. Exams will consist of short-answer and essay questions. Study questions for most readings will serve as your study guide. Note the exam dates:
 - MIDTERM: Monday, March 4
 - FINAL: Wednesday, May 8, at 8:30 a.m.
2. **Research project**, worth 20%: a 10-page paper focusing on a course-related topic of your choice, to be presented in the seminar. You will get guidelines. Due dates:
 - PROPOSALS are due on Monday, March 25, by 10:40 a.m.
 - FINAL VERSION (electronic) is due the last day of class, April 29, by 5:00 p.m.
3. **Debate and presentations** – 10% of final grade. You will get guidelines. One debate will be about American law, the other mainly about the American economy and government. Anticipate doing debate research around February 15 and March 29.
4. **Preparation, participation, attendance**, worth 10%. I expect you to be fully prepared for each class, ready to answer questions about the material. You will get credit for active participation, including raising good questions. Each unexcused absence over three lowers your p/p/a grade by a full point, less than three such absences will raise it by a full point.
5. **Extra credit options:** I will offer several extra-credit options during the semester.

Course etiquette

1. Laptops:

- you are welcome to bring a laptop, if you wish, but *only* for class purposes
- improper use counts as an absence; a repeat results in an F for participation
- for some sessions or discussions I will ask you to turn off your laptops.

2. Cell phones: turn them off!

3. Food and drink: no food, please, and no gum or other chewable distractions; drinks are OK.

Honor code

The honor code is in effect throughout the semester. By taking this course, you affirm that it is a violation of the code to cheat on exams, to plagiarize, to deviate from the teacher's instructions about collaboration on work that is submitted for grades, to give false information to a faculty member, and to undertake any other form of academic misconduct. You agree that the teacher is entitled to move you to another seat during examinations, without explanation. You also affirm that if you witness others violating the code you have a duty to report them to the Honor Council.

Schedule

- Numbered readings are from the Schuck/Wilson reader, all others will be posted
- To manage your work load, I will assign readings in class
- I may add short assignments or readings, as needed
- Among the additional readings may be materials by the instructor
- I may alter the schedule and sequence slightly, if necessary
- Classes marked * will require above-average reading
- Some class discussions will take the form of debate, with assigned roles

Perspectives on the American exception

1/16 Introduction

1/18 What makes America special?

Lechner, "Introduction" (posted)

Assignment: bring a concrete item to illustrate "what makes America special"

*1/23 What made America the first "democratic" country?

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, excerpts

Lechner, "Tocqueville on American Exceptionalism"

1/25 Why was/is there no socialism in America?

Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, excerpt

Lechner, "Socialism and American Exceptionalism"

- *1/28 How do others see “us” today?
 #20: Joffe, “A Canvas, Not a Country: How Europe Sees America”
 Lechner, “Anti-Americanism and the American Exception”
 Assignment: bring an example of foreign perceptions of the U.S.
- 1/30 **Presentations:** How does America stand out in the world?
 Assignment (small groups): report on a case of American “deviance”

“A sea of faith”: American religion

- 2/1 Is the megachurch a uniquely American institution?
 Lee/Sinitiere, “Surfing Spiritual Waves: Rick Warren and the Purpose-Driven Church”
 Lechner, “Megachurches and the American Religious Exception”
- 2/4 Why are Americans uniquely religious – and are they, really?
 #10: Wuthnow, “Religion”
- 2/6 How does faith bind Americans together – and does it? American civil religion
 Guest speaker: Dr. Gary Laderman; reading TBA
- 2/8 Is the U.S. exporting the “American gospel”?
 Micklethwait/Wooldridge, *God Is Back*, chapter 8

“A nation under lawyers”: American law

- 2/11 Why does the U.S. hold on to the death penalty?
 Steiker, “Capital Punishment and American Exceptionalism”
 Lechner, “Capital Punishment and the American Legal Exception”
- *2/13 Is American law (still) special?
 #3: Friedman, “The Legal System”
 Kagan, *Adversarial Legalism*, excerpt
- 2/15-8 **Debate preparation and debate:** Is America’s distinctive Constitution outdated?
- 2/20 Does (and should) the U.S. have a special place in world law?
 Koh, “On American Exceptionalism”

“Almost an island unto itself”: American sports

- 2/22 Why is (was?) baseball America’s “national pastime”?
 Cogliano, “Baseball and American Exceptionalism”
 Lechner, “Baseball and the American Sports Exception”
- 2/25 Why is America a “sports island”?
 Markovits and Hellerman, *Offside: Sports and American Exceptionalism*, excerpt
 Lechner “Football and the American Sports Exception”

2/27 How do (or don't) major sports events express American distinction?
Assignment TBA

3/1 Is America still a sports island?
Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, excerpt

3/4 **Midterm exam**

"People of plenty": The American economy

*3/6 What is the "American dream" and what is happening to it?
McGinn, *House Lust*, excerpt
Hardaway, *The Great American Housing Bubble*, excerpt
Lechner, "Houses and the American Economic Exception"

3/8 Why are Americans so rich?
#4: Friedman, "The Economic System"

3/18 Why is America so unequal?
Noah, *The Great Divergence*, excerpt

3/20 How did America become the economic "hyperpower"?
Lichtenstein, "Wal-Mart's Long March to China"

"Land of liberty": American government

3/22 Does U.S. health insurance reform fundamentally change the role of government?
#15: Cutler/Keenan, "Health Care"
Lechner, "Health Policy and the American Government Exception"

3/25 Why does American government (generally) do less for citizens?
#17: Burtless/Haskins, "Inequality, Economic Mobility, and Social Policy"

Paper proposals due

3/27 Is American education (still) exceptional?
#14: Peterson, "Education"

3/29-4/1 **Debate preparation and debate:** Is America losing its edge?

"E Pluribus Unum": American community

4/3 How is Atlanta a microcosm of the nation?
Lechner, "Atlanta and the American Community Exception"

4/5 How (de)segregated is America?
#13: Patterson, "Black Americans"

4/8 How is America's community tied to the world?
#12: Schuck, "Immigration"

"No business like show business": American media

4/10 How does American music convey what it means to be American?
Musical examples

4/12 What makes American media so dynamic?
#7: Lichter, "The Media"

4/15 Why does Hollywood rule the world?
Cowen, "Why Hollywood Rules the World"

"Dangerous nation": The American military and foreign policy

4/17 Why is America so strong?
#9: Cohen, "The Military"
Lechner, "Wars on Terror and the American Foreign Policy Exception"

4/19 What makes the U.S. a "dangerous nation"?
Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, excerpt
Brands, *What America Owes the World*, excerpt

4/22 Can America remain the sole superpower, and should it?
Nye, "The Future of American Power"
Informal debate

4/24-4/29 **Presentations**

4/29, 5:00 p.m. **Paper due**

5/8, 8:30 a.m. **Final exam**