

Spring 2012

**REIMAGINING THE UNITED STATES: MODIFYING THE AMERICAN
DREAM**

POLS/SOC 497

Saturdays: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

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NO TEXTBOOK

INTRODUCTION:

Various definitions of the concept of the American Dream and its several socio-cultural and political-economic drivers will be studied in this course. We will explore what the Dream has meant to Americans from the early days of the Republic through our own times and what effects attempting to fulfill the Dream has had on America's make-up and worldview. The class will discuss the material as well as the non-material ("spiritual") aspect of the American Dream and the desirability of modifying it. We will also address a possible (consequent) reshaping of America into a more ecologically sustainable and more ethically sound nation.

Some of our readings and student assignments may appear (on the surface) not closely connected with the theme of our course, "The American Dream." But I'm going to leave it to the student to realize the connections/relationships, discover differences or thematic similarities among the books recommended for the Book Report, and build his or her own understanding of the American Dream through the readings and the assignments. The atmosphere and the structure of the class/course will be relaxed and flexible; and hence, hopefully, conducive to and inviting for student participation.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS COURSE

- **We will explore some influences on the evolution of the concept:**

As a class, we shall delve into the "psyche" of America, into the cultural, political, and sociological ideals and "myths" that have shaped the United States. We shall explore the various ideologies that guide Americans in their "pursuit of happiness." The class may discuss what prompts or motivates Americans in their expectations from their government (in general, the less the better) and the missions or goals they want their other institutions – School, Church, and

Business -- to serve, in brief, what kind of life Americans generally think is worth living.

- **We shall critically evaluate today's domestic or internal forces:**

Special interests and large corporations (thanks to the recent ruling of the U. S. Supreme Court) exert so much pressure and power on all the three branches of the U.S. government that one wonders whether this republic is any more (what Lincoln described it to be) "for the people, by the people and of the people." We shall discuss whether the U.S. government has become an instrument to be manipulated by those who have power and wealth rather than being the manifestation and implementer of average citizens' collective will. We may raise the issue whether one can legitimately describe the U.S. as a plutocracy or oligarchy. We shall also study how other countries view the United States, "looking from outside in."

- **This course will be taught as a seminar:**

What this characteristic of the course means is that lecturing will be minimal in the delivery of this course. The main responsibility for learning, gathering information, and doing thorough research on various topics relevant to the course will rest with the students. The students will write essays/research papers. Oral presentations on various topics will be one mode of peer learning. My role will be mainly to guide, coach, monitor, critique, and evaluate student effort.

- **Teaching and learning are revolutionary activities:**

I believe that teaching involves more than just giving information; it encourages radical (going to the roots) thinking and debate. In my judgment, teaching and learning at the *University* challenge mainstream or accepted thinking. Just imparting information or only building skills constitutes training, not education, and is the surest way of making oneself obsolete or outmoded. University education should transform both the teacher and the taught. I'd like the students not just to work hard but to work *smart*. This is the position in critical pedagogy I believe in.

Early in the semester, maybe, during the second or third session (Jan 28th or Feb 4th), we could read and discuss in class my two-page preface ("preamble") to this course. It will furnish us with various themes, strands, or directions to pursue during the entirety of the semester.

POLICIES

- (1) Tardiness and absences are discouraged: Each unexcused absence will cost 20 points. Serious reasons and unavoidable circumstances are okay, but no "frivolous" excuses!

- (2) The presenter should make every effort to finish the oral report within the allotted time.
- (3) Oral presentation grades are non-negotiable.
- (4) The use of standard, “educated” English is required for all assignments. (Please proofread carefully before submission). Correct language is not just for “English” courses; it is for ALL communication.
- (5) Once presentation dates are set, students will be expected to stick to the schedule.

EVALUATION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The First Assignment: In-Class Essay (100 points)

Due date: On the first day: January 21, 2012

You will write an essay (approximately 500 words) about *your* (American) Dream. How have the concept and the tradition of the American-Dream affected *you*? You may want to consider the following dimensions among others:

- 1) Has your idea of the American Dream evolved, changed, over the years?
- 2) Are you aware of the influences or forces that have helped to shape it?
- 3) What do you think is the American Dream of your parents, friends, or other relatives?
- 4) Can you link the general concept of the American Dream with *your* individual version of it?

My purpose in asking you to write this *impromptu* essay is to get an idea of how you write – your “feel” for language (your style), how you develop a thesis or a core idea, and how you craft/achieve a coherently sustained piece of writing.

The Second Assignment: Miscellaneous Research Project (200 points)

Due date: February 11, 2012

My goal for this project (with four parts: A, B, C and D) is to find out the depth and the breadth of your **research skills**. The annotations and your critical comments (the final product) should be about **four** pages, double-spaced. The objective is that any body that has not read your sources/original articles should still be able to get their gist or main points so that the reader of your paper will know the context in which to readily grasp your thesis and comments. Please do **not** attach the articles/documents, unless I ask for (some of) them. Just provide a bibliography. Each student chooses **one** topic out of the 18 listed below (It is an assortment of topics; I’d like **all** of them covered):

(A)

Find **five** articles, commentaries regarding the following provisions in the US Constitution and **ANNOTATE/EVALUATE** them (*your* views):

1. Presidential veto power
2. Two senators from every state
3. Electoral College
4. “Right to bear arms”
5. “Promote the general welfare”

(B)

List **FIVE** articles or documents/sources on the following issues; again please provide **CRITICAL** comments on them:

6. US interventions south of its border
7. Current global presence of the US military (bases)
8. Ideas/ideologies associated with the English Civil War of the 1640s (similar and dissimilar to those current during the American War of Independence)
9. In what ways is the US a “revolutionary” nation (and in what ways it is not)?

(C)

Research **five** sources related to the impact of each of the following “enlightenment” figures on the Founding Fathers (**Make sure that you annotate your sources**):

10. Adam Smith
11. Hobbes
12. Locke
13. Descartes
14. Rousseau
15. Voltaire

(D)

16. An analysis of the historical, cultural, and economic influences that (may) have shaped the “Dream” of the people in the following countries: Canada, Mexico, France, Egypt, South Africa, India, or China (Choose **one** country for in-depth treatment).

17. A critical review of the depiction of the American Dream in some documentaries, movies, or in the fine arts, such as painting and music

18. An exploration of the influence of Church, School, and/or Television on the shaping of the American Dream

The Third Assignment: Book Summary and Critique (400 points)

Due date for the written paper: March 10, 2012

Each student selects a book from the list provided by me. **No book shall be chosen by more than one student.** The written book report should consist of two parts: (a) a summary and (b) a critical evaluation. Please also demonstrate in what ways the theme and its treatment in the book deepen or contribute to the enrichment of the concept of the American Dream.

The report (the two parts together) should be **approximately 2,000 words, about 8 to 10 pages (typed double-spaced).**

1. If you must go outside my list for some reason, select **only** scholarly books, published preferably after 2000.
2. Do not choose novels, poetry, or plays (no light literature).
3. You must also include **your own, original** critical evaluation of the book, not from amazon.com or other (external-to-you) sources. The report must clearly indicate that you have read and reflected upon the book.
4. The report will be written, **and** presented in class orally.
5. An **annotated** bibliography of 10 articles related to the topic/thesis of the book should be attached.
6. A question-and-answer period will be an essential part of your oral presentation.

The student gives a hard copy of the report to the instructor and presents it **orally** to the class.

The Fourth Assignment: Analysis and Reflection (300 points)

Due date for the written part: April 14, 2012

All the students in the class will read and reflect on the *first three* of the following core “documents”/“events”. They should print off these three documents and bring them to class when I initiate a class discussion on them. The first three are *my* “responsibility” and the rest are to be led by the students:

- 1) The Declaration of Independence
- 2) The Constitution of the United States with the Bill of Rights
- 3) The Monroe Doctrine
- 4) The Gettysburg Address
- 5) The Emancipation Proclamation
- 6) The concept of “Manifest Destiny”
- 7) American women’s suffrage movement
- 8) Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal”

- 9) Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech
- 10) The Homestead Act
- 11) The GI Bill
- 12) The Tea Party Movement
- 13) The "Occupy" Protests

From "events" 4 through 13, each student will choose *one* event on which to write an analytical essay and also to give an **oral presentation** to the class. Each student consults at least **five** credible analytical sources for other (expert?) "opinions" regarding their chosen event. *This could be a partnered project: two students may get together to select one event.* In that case, of course, they will need to provide 10 sources. Please do **not** attach the articles/documents, unless I ask for (some of) them. Just provide a bibliography.

The students should demonstrate in their essays their understanding of the life-changing significance of these core events for Americans and of the contribution of these events to the shaping or evolution of the concept of the American Dream.

Notes:

My grade and evaluation of the oral portions of your assignments will take into account how competently and confidently you field questions from the class.

Total freedom of expression for every student is guaranteed in this class.