Instructor:

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Course Description

This seminar will adopt a sociological perspective to examine some contemporary social issues. It has always seemed to me that Americans worry a great deal, and that these worries incorporate both a nostalgia for the past (“Things have gotten worse!”), and a dread regarding the future (“Things are going to get even worse!”). I want to examine some examples of these worries.

In general, we will have two sorts of readings. First, there will be a general assignment for each week: this will be a modest amount of material that I will ask each of you to examine, including both popular and academic discussions of the week’s issue. I have tried to select a broad range of readings; I certainly hope that you will find some that present views different from your own. A few of these readings do descend into arcane theorizing or abstruse statistical analyses. Don’t worry about this, skim over the incomprehensible parts; just ferret out the thesis and the nature of the supporting argument. I have tried to select readings that are available electronically. In addition, I have identified two or three recent books related to each week’s topic, and each student will be asked to read two of these during the course of the semester, and come to class both with a brief written book review (no more than three pages), and prepared to discuss what the book has to say (do not read your review—relax and talk about the book). Ideally, both the review and the comments should present a brief overview of the book’s contents, followed by your critical reaction (how does this book fit within our larger course, etc.).

Finally, I am going to ask that each of you prepare an independent analysis of some topic related to the larger class (you might choose one of the topics we’ve selected, or something that I’ve overlooked). I will expect you to present your findings orally before the group during one of our final sessions, and to turn in a paper on your topic.

Grades will be based on overall class participation (10 points), the first book review (10 points), the second book review (20 points), and the final paper/presentation (40 points).
Locating the Readings

All of the required readings are available on the web or through the UD library’s electronic resources. In most cases, go to the library’s web page, and click on “Electronic Journals.” Locate the name of the journal in the alphabetical list, click on the link, etc. (I have suggested a database link in bold following each article listing).

Outline:

**Feb. 7: What Do We Worry About–and Why?**

No assignment, although feel free to consider the question and how you might answer it.

**Feb. 14: COVID-19 as a Policy Problem**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


**Feb. 21: COVID-19 as a Cultural Problem: Debating Masks and Vaccines**

**Required reading**


Relevant books


Feb. 28: Growing Polarization

Required reading


Relevant books

Bill Bishop, The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart (Mariner, 2009)
Lee Drutman, Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America (Oxford University Press, 2020)

Mar. 7: Inequality as an Issue

Required reading


**Relevant books**


**Mar. 14: Problematic Cultures**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


Mar. 21: Police Shootings

Required reading


Relevant books

Jennifer E. Cobbina, Hands Up, Don’t Shoot: Why the Protests in Ferguson and Baltimore Matter, and How They Changed America (New York University Press, 2019)


Apr. 4: The Politics of Holidays

Required reading


Relevant books


**Apr. 11: Difficult Memories: 1619, 1776, etc.**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


**Apr. 18: UFOs, QAnon, and Other Unusual Concerns**

**Required reading**

Matthew N. Hannah, “A Conspiracy of Data: QAnon, Social Media, and Information Visualization,” *Social Media + Society* 7, 3 (2021):


**Relevant books**


Apr. 25:  The Subscription Economy

Required reading


Relevant books

Alexander Manu, *Transforming Organizations for the Subscription Economy: Starting from Scratch* (Routledge, 2018)


May 2:  Are We Running Out of Babies, and Is That a Bad Thing?

Required reading


Relevant books

Jonathan V. Last, *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting: America’s Coming Demographic Disaster* (Encounter, 2013).


May 9:  The Majority-Minority Future

Required reading


Relevant books


May 16: Presentations (More?)