Instructor:

Joel Best

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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%), the first book review (10%), the second book review (20%), and the final paper/presentation (40%).
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. 14: What Do We Worry About–and Why?**

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

**Feb. 21: American Dreams/American Nightmares**

**Required reading**

Eleanor Krause and Isabel V. Sawhill, “Seven Reasons to Worry about the American Middle Class,” Brookings (June 5, 2018). (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2018/06/05/seven-reasons-to-worry-about-the-american-middle-class/)


**Relevant books**


**Feb. 28: Sonic Attacks and Other Episodic Anxieties**

**Required reading**


Joel Best, “Knock, Knock–Who’s Scared?” *Deviant Behavior* (forthcoming)

**Relevant books**


**Mar. 7: Fake News**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


(or any other recent book with “post-truth” in its title)

**Mar. 14: Popular Hazards**

**Required reading**


(https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/issues/number-26-winter-2016)

**Relevant books**


Or find some equivalent book on a policy issue that interests you.

**Mar. 21: Opioids: Breaking the Drug Panic Mold?**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


**Mar. 28: Dreamers, Walls, and Caravans: New Debates about an Old Issue**

**Required reading**


**Relevant books**


**Apr. 11: Difficult Memories: Flags, Statues, and Monuments**

*Required reading*


*Relevant books*


**Apr. 18: Defending the Rest Rooms and Other Fears about Gender**

*Required reading*


*Relevant books*

**Apr. 25: NO CLASS** (I will be out of town)

**May 2: Digital Movements (Black Lives Matter, MeToo, Occupy, etc.): Has Everything Changed?**

Required reading


Relevant books


**May 9: Big Pictures**

Required reading


Relevant books


*May 16: Presentations (More?)*