

American University  
Spring 2009  
**Sociology 684: Seminar in Public Sociology**

Instructor: Jeff Breese, Ph.D.  
Phone: 703-284-1546 (office); 703-463-7530 (cell)  
Email: [jeffrey.breese@marymount.edu](mailto:jeffrey.breese@marymount.edu)  
Office Hours: By appointment only

Class meets: Tuesdays, 5:30 to 8:00 p.m.  
Class location: Lounge/Conference Room 30 - Battelle Tompkins

### SEMINAR IN PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

“As mirror and conscience of society, sociology must define, promote and inform public debate about deepening class and racial inequalities, new gender regimes, environmental degradation, market fundamentalism, state and non-state violence. I believe that the world needs public sociology - a sociology that transcends the academy - more than ever. Our potential publics are multiple, ranging from media audiences to policy makers, from silenced minorities to social movements. They are local, global, and national. As public sociology stimulates debate in all these contexts, it inspires and revitalizes our discipline. In return, theory and research give legitimacy, direction, and substance to public sociology. Teaching is equally central to public sociology: students are our first public for they carry sociology into all walks of life. Finally, the critical imagination, exposing the gap between what is and what could be infuses values into public sociology to remind us that the world could be different.” –Michael Burawoy (2004 President, ASA... from his personal statement for the ASA elections)

“A public sociologist is a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly), has something to say.” – Herbert Gans (1999)

"If we aren't doing public sociology, we're just talking to each other. To claim to study society and to say that you 'needn't bother to make your work relevant or accessible to social members' - well, that seems to me just plain insane."--Sharon Hays, Streisand Professor of Contemporary Gender Studies, University of Southern California

"Once we acknowledge the sharp divisions in our society, we have to decide which publics we want to work with. I propose . . . that we strive to address the public and political problems of people at the lower end of the many hierarchies that define our society."--Frances Fox Piven, former president of the American Sociological Association

"We must tend to our job of getting enough truth of the kind that can bear on the future, which is what is relevant to public discourse.... we should not be distracted much by contributing to public discourse, and what we do along that line is not likely to be much use to the public."--Arthur Stinchcombe, formerly John Evans Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University

**Course description:** Students review and analyze how well-known sociologists participate in public discourse through theoretically-grounded debate on pressing social issues; gain appreciation of sociology's application to the public sphere; experience first-hand involvement in civic discourse on policy and the antecedent factors underlying social problems, and participate in constructing and evaluating social theories to inform civic discourse.

Public Sociologists believe that sociologists should not only engage in the intellectual pursuit of knowledge through innovative approaches to theoretical analysis and sociological research methodology. They should also engage in public discourse in order to raise awareness of social injustice and inequality, and the importance of civic engagement to a functional democratic society.

During this graduate seminar, students experience the challenges of public sociology and begin to develop the skills necessary to apply the theoretical and methodological tools of sociology to affect social change.

This is a skills-based course. We will focus on the theoretical, methodological and practical tools used by sociologists to engage in civic discourse and promote a “dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society.” Students critically analyze the status of sociology as an applied social science and practice formulating theoretically and empirically grounded solutions to social problems through experiential learning exercises, class discussions and a variety of reading material.

Students will be exposed to the various methodologies and theories used to communicate sociological information to a broad audience, employing the techniques used by professionals doing public sociology. These techniques include, but are not limited to: organizational assessment and program evaluation, policy research and analysis, grant research and writing, and applications to key fields and specialties from the discipline of sociology. All of these skills are essential to the success of any Public Sociologist as they help to communicate complex ideas to community leaders and decision makers, facilitate social change and inform debate on critical policy issues.

**The goals of this course are:**

1. To develop an understanding of the value and historical contribution of Public Sociologists;
2. To better appreciate the potential applications of the discipline of sociology;
3. To gain some of the experience and skills necessary to influence decision makers and stakeholders.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

### ***General Class Participation and Attendance (20 points)***

**This is an upper-level graduate course in sociology.** In this course, the expectation is that you are a serious student, committed to excellence in scholarship and professional skills. Class assignments will include individual and group activities involving full class participation, creative writing and societal interaction and research. **Students are expected to complete all reading assignments prior to each class session, participate/engage in class discussions and come to class prepared.** No late arrivals or early departures from class will be tolerated, and these will impact the overall participation/attendance portion of the grade.

### ***Class lead discussion/Annotated Bibliography (20 points)***

Public sociologists work and are situated in various settings, and specialize in a wide variety of fields. To further the class's appreciation of this reality, each student will select (on a first come, first serve basis) from one of the following areas and lead a class discussion/present on the chosen area:

- Community & Urban Sociology
- Work & Organizations
- Medical Sociology
- Criminology & Criminal Justice
- Education
- Social Psychology/Micro Sociology

On the evenings of **February 24 and March 3**, these discussions shall take place. You are encouraged to select an area that fits with your larger interests within the field of sociology. This assignment, and how it will be evaluated, consists of the following components:

-Presenting on and leading a class discussion of the corresponding assigned chapters from the relevant class text(s) which are indicated on the course schedule page of the syllabus. As well as providing the class with other references/handouts that you, as the instructor, would want the rest of us to read in advance as preparation for the selected topic.

-Prepare a detailed annotated bibliography of the topic you have selected. Specifically, you are to put together a minimum of 20 references (from relevant academic journal articles in sociology or relevant related fields) that represent the latest trends, current research, and common methodological approaches for this topic. If warranted, any of these entries could be provided to the class in advance, if you wish to have the class review/read it in preparation of your class lead discussion. Be sure to have a copy of your annotated bibliography printed out and available to all members of the class the night of your presentation. Also: send an electronic version of your annotated bibliography to the instructor (in WORD format).

***Applied Sociological Theory Paper (20 points)***

***Due Date: March 17***

The Applied Sociological Theory Paper (ASTP) provides an opportunity for seminar participants to learn about a single Public Sociologist practicing today, and trace her/his theoretical and methodological lineage beginning with the discipline's founders. Through this exercise, seminar participants will gain a deeper understanding of the importance of sociological theory and method, biography and social context in formulating positions on social problems and social issues. To begin the ASTP, students will conduct a brief literature review of a contemporary Public Sociologist of their choosing. The literature review will summarize the subject's professional work in terms of her/his use of theory, methods and subject matter. Students will contact their subject via e-mail or telephone to discuss in greater detail her/his choices of theory, methods and subject matter (i.e. welfare, corporate corruption, social inequality etc) and an explanation of the challenges her/his subject encounters while engaging multiple publics in civic discourse. Then, students will trace the sociological lineage of their chosen Public Sociologist to identify those that have influenced their work. Each paper should include a critique of the approaches used by the subject.

The final product will be a 7-10 page exploration of the biography, professional life and social context of a Public Sociologist. *Papers must use 12 point font with double-spacing. Books, articles, unpublished reports etc., must be correctly cited in a reference section using ASA standards. Please do not rely on Internet articles unless it is absolutely necessary.* Each student will conduct a 20 minute presentation based on her/his ASTP in class. Presentations will be held on and the papers are due: March 17<sup>th</sup>

***Internship Exploration (10 points)***

***Due Date: April 21***

For some (if not most) students enrolled in this class, a future program requirement may be completion of an "internship in public sociology." To prepare each student with exploring this phase of their graduate education, this assignment requires each student to consider a minimum of five potential internship placements. This exploration culminates in a paper (and brief presentation to the larger class) that includes for each potential site:

- What are the potential sociological connections that would be available in this setting;
- What information were you able to find out about the setting and who was the contact person there you talked with/obtained information from;
- What is the likelihood you would pursue this particular site for an internship placement and how does it fit with your general interests in public sociology.

Even if you are not planning to or are not in need of completing an internship experience for your degree program, this exercise could prove useful since it demonstrates ways in which the discipline of sociology can be applied and a better understanding of actually taking part in public sociology.

The location for the "organization assessment" assignment you will complete can be one of the five organizations/agencies you report on for this assignment.

## ***Final Project: Organization Assessment & Presentation (30 points)***

***Due Date: April 28***

This experiential learning project (final project approximately 20 pages) and final class presentation is a semester long project that will culminate in a detailed analysis and presentation on a topic chosen by each student. In order to complete the work of this project, each student should plan on spending 5 to 10 hours on site (minimum) to gather the necessary information for the assignment. A comprehensive presentation will be offered by each student. This presentation needs to be polished, professional, and applied in focus highlighting the public sociology elements to the work you engaged in for this assignment. Each student will need to select an agency or organization to frame the focus of this project.

### I. Strategic Plan

-determine the target level of the social organization

-steps in the planning process

...what is the organization's purpose?

...what are its abstract statements of purpose (goals)?

...how will these goals be achieved (objective)?

...how can the organization or program be evaluated?

### II. Needs Assessment

-describe the target population and the service environment

-identify needs (a need is the value judgment that some group has a problem that can be solved)

-identify solutions

...cost analysis (resources necessary for the solution to operate; personnel, facilities, equipment, material and supplies, client costs, other)

...impact (much more difficult to measure than costs, because reliable and valid information is rarely available)

...feasibility

### III. Organizational Analysis

-define the organization's culture (a pattern of basic assumptions-- invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems or external adaptation and internal integration-- that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems)

-norms and dominant values espoused by the organization

-the philosophy that guides the organization

-the feeling or climate that is conveyed in the organization by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with clients and/or outsiders

-training, orientation, allocations of resources, policies/procedures, information and communication systems

This project represents an important opportunity for students to gain “real-world” experience in the kind of work that Public Sociologists do. The Harrison text is a key resource for this assignment, as well as other resources and readings that you are exposed to during the semester.

## TEACHING METHOD

This class is intended to be conducted in an activity based, interactive style. As such, the standard lecture format is undesirable. You will be required to come to class fully prepared to discuss and share your thoughts about all reading materials and assignments. Students should feel free to construct and express critical opinions about topics addressed but remembering to be respectful of others' (peer and instructor) ideas and thoughts. All students are expected to attend class regularly and promptly. You are responsible for all material covered in class, announcements, deadlines and discussions about assignments, regardless of whether you are present.

### ***One Shot Deal – NO Make-ups or Late Assignments***

Except in emergency situations, if you anticipate a scheduling conflict due to a medical, legal or personal issue, please consult me in advance regarding any assignments due that day. However, no make-up assignments and activities will be given. If a late assignment is accepted, this will result in an immediate 10 point reduction, and a 5 point reduction thereafter for each day late. But typically unless there are unusual circumstances, **late work will not be accepted**. There will be no make-up for any in-class co-facilitation and/or presentations.

### **Required Reading**

It is expected that each student will complete all required reading prior to class.

#### **-Blackboard:**

Students are required to access the course's "Blackboard" site, which is an on-line resource with information and resources for this class. You will find required readings, websites, announcements, and other materials relevant to this course. Be certain to check this site on a regular basis.

#### **-Required Books:**

Diagnosing Organizations (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Michael I. Harrison. 2004. Sage.

Practicing Sociology: Selected Fields. Robert A. Dentler. 2002. Praeger.

Using Sociology: An Introduction from the Applied and Clinical Perspectives (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Roger A. Straus (ed.). 2002. Rowman & Littlefield.

#### **-Handouts/References to other readings:**

Various articles, related handouts, electronic sources and other resources maybe distributed in class on occasion, or assigned to review which are required for a future class date.

### **Grading**

Organization Assessment & Presentation	30 points
Applied Sociological Theoretical Paper	20 points
Class lead discussion/Bibliography	20 points
Class Participation and Attendance	20 points
Internship Exploration	10 points

#### **Final Grades are calculated as follows:**

93-100 A	87-89 B+	80-82 B-	73-76 C	0-69 F
90-92 A-	83-86 B	77-79 C+	70-72 C-	

## **COURSE SCHEDULE – Subject to Change per Instructor’s Discretion**

This course is not comprehensive. There are myriad critiques, texts, and research articles of many of these topics, and as such, there are many important areas we will not be able to touch on. However, to maximize the amount we can cover in a single semester, readings considered representative were selected.

### **Course Schedule**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Readings</b>
Jan 13	Introduction to the course: Overview of syllabus and class	
Jan 20	<b>Inauguration Day (no classes and university offices closed)</b>	
Jan 27	Sociological Perspective & Public Sociology	Dentler, Preface & Chapter 1 Straus, Preface & Chapter 1 Elliott & Williams, article (handout)
Feb 3	Making Applications of Sociological Theory	Dentler, Chapter 2 Straus, Chapter 2
Feb 10	Public Sociology as Research	Straus, Chapter 3
Feb 17	The Nature of Public Policy Research & Work	Straus, Chapter 9
Feb 24	Public Sociology and the fields of:	
Mar 3	Community & Urban Sociology	Straus, Chapter 8
	Work & Organizations	Straus, Chapter 6; Dentler, Chapters 3 and 4
	Medical Sociology	Straus, Chapter 5
	Criminology & Criminal Justice	Straus, Chapter 7
	Education	Dentler, Chapter 5
	Social Psychology/Micro Sociology	Straus, Chapter 4
Mar 10	<b>Spring Break (no class)</b>	
Mar 17	Presentations of Applied Sociological Theory Papers Diagnosing and Evaluating Organizations	Posavac & Carey, chapter (handout) Dentler, Chapter 6 Harrison, Preface and Chapters 1 and 2
Mar 24	Organization Assessment	Harrison (remainder of the text) Kopczynski & Pritchard, chapter (handout)
Mar 31	Applying Sociology to the Future Guest: Dr. Stephen Steele	Various websites assigned to review
Apr 7	The Nature of & State of Public Sociology	Burawoy, article & symposium (handouts) Various websites assigned to review
Apr 14	Government Information Sources and Grant Writing Guest: Dr. Augie Diana	Ries & Leukefeld, chapter (handout)
Apr 21	Internship discussions and explorations	
Apr 28	Organization Assessment due and presentations	