Sociology 412

Social Construction of Reality

Instructor: Tom Semm Office: NH211

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Class Meets: Office Hours:

Tues/Thurs 11:00 to 12:15 Tues/Thurs 2:00 to 3:00

Texts:

Davis, Mike. *Ecology of Fear*

Ewen, Stuart. *PR! A Social History of Spin*.

Fraser, Steven. *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of Organized Resistance to Wealth and Power.*

Dower, John W. *The Violent American Century: War and Terror Since World War II.*

Course Description:

Traditionally, classes in the social construction of reality examine the ways in which micro, or daily, social interactions create, and recreate, an objective social world that in turn acts upon them. Since the publication of the work that originally defined the discipline, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality, several factors have transformed it. The first factor is the linguistic turn which has conceptualized a new idea of language. Its main claims are that language mediates human experience of the world, more radically, creates the “world”; it also claims that language structures consciousness and is inextricably woven to power relations. There is no better example of the connection between language and power than the word “freedom” which is now being used in a specific way, unlike any previous way, by powerful interest groups to justify policies of determinism (unfreedom). The other factors which have impacted social construction are post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-empiricism. From this transformed point of view, the macro-structures of society, in fact modernity itself and its ideologies (science as one), are socially constructed phenomena. They are not the result of micro interactions, nor of evolutionary development, but of social and cultural forces and powerful interests creating, shaping and justifying a world in which they are the primary beneficiaries. The social construction of reality from this point of view can demystify reality as given, “out there,” natural and inevitable, as something to which we must conform, and reveals it as a construct and can point us in the direction of recreating it.

For example, economists claim to be scientists of the market. They argue that the market is a system, an autonomous sphere, a reality out there and that it functions according to given laws, laws as predictable as the laws of nature. They claim to have discovered this market system, the laws that govern it, and human nature, individual’s driven by greed. An examination of these claims from the social construction point of view demonstrate that the market system (free market, capitalism) is a social construction, as is the claim about human nature. Various social forces and powerful interest groups were involved in shaping it and its ideology, which includes the discipline of economics. This is important because the myth of the market system is the dominant ideology in the U.S. and globally and as neoliberalism presently claims to be the truth. And in fact, one of its claims is the deterministic one that there is no other alternative, to be free we must live in a market system.

One other example, science claims to be an autonomous discipline, governed by an objective method. Scientists, pursuing this supposedly neutral and unbiased method, claim to have discovered a thing called “intelligence.” And they claim this thing can be measured through the application of an IQ test. A critique of these claims from a social construction point of view reveals there is no empirical evidence that there is a thing called intelligence, or that an IQ test could measure it even if there were. The critique also reveals the function of this claim is ideological. It justifies broad social inequalities based on race, gender and class.

The focus of this class will be on examining the socially constructed nature of the world we live in today. In other words, what social forces and which powerful groups have shaped American society. There will be four central areas of analysis: ideology/mythology, economy, political system, and war.

Courses Goals:

1. Students should gain an understanding of how the institutions and ideologies of modern society emerged.
2. Students should gain an understanding of how science, technology, forces of consumerism have allowed powerful interests to create a post-modern reality.
3. Students should gain the ability to analyze social phenomena from a critical point of view.
4. Students should recognize social reality as a set of social phenomena that have been created by social forces and institutional actors to serve their interests and that social reality can be changed through collective action.

Evaluation Process:

There will be three exams worth one hundred (100) points each. There will be several announced quizzes. And there may be extra credit opportunities, but such opportunities will depend on whether the socially constructed environment of the class is positive.

Classroom Expectations:

As I say every semester, I am not a vice principal, nor a disciplinarian, and I do not appreciate having to be one. So stay off your cell phones, the internet, no private conversations, no outside reading material, and do not come to class and study for another class. I do not take attendance, so you do not have to be in class, and if you are and you break the rules, I will deduct points from your grade the first time, and after that I will flunk you no matter what.

**Class** **Topic** **Assignment**

Week 1 Introduction

**PART I Social Construction of a Myth: “American Exceptionalism”**

Week 2 “American Exceptionalism” Fraser, Intro, Ch 1

Week 3 Manifest Destiny Fraser, Ch 2

**PART II Social Construction of the American Capitalism**

Week 4 American “Capitalism” Fraser, Ch 3

Week 5 Primitive Accumulation Davis, Ch 5 (pp 199-239)

Week 6 **Exam #1 Tuesday Feb 25**

Week 7 Second Civil War Fraser, Ch 4, 5

Ewen, Part 2

Week 8 WWII and the American Dream Dower, Ch 1, 2

Davis, Ch 2

Week 9 Oligarchy and Democracy Fraser, Ch 7, 8

Week 10 **Exam #2 Tuesday March 24**

Week 11 **Spring Break March 30-April 3**

**Part III Social Construction of a Benevolent Empire**

Week 12 Democracy for the Few Ewen, Part 4

Fraser, Ch 9, 10

Week 13 Benevolent Empire Dower, Ch 3, 4

Week 14 Social Construction of Dower, Ch 5, 6, 7

Armageddon Fraser, Ch 11

Week 15 Social Construction of Dower, Ch 8, 9

Natural Disaster Fraser, Ch 12, 13

Week 16 **Exam #3 Tuesday May 5**

Final Grade: Total points and grade average will be posted on Blackboard.

A 92.5%-up B+ 87.5%-89.4% C+ 77.5%-79.4% F <60%

A- 89.5%-92.4% B 82.5-87.4 C 69.5%-77.4%

B- 79.5%-82.4% D <69.4%

FAQ

If you are having serious emotional, personal and/or health problems that are affecting your performance in this course or other courses, you need to immediately contact health services and/or your academic advisor.

The grading criteria (see Evaluation Process) are the same for everyone. I do not modify the grading criteria for students based on individual circumstances. There are no makeup exams if you miss an exam without an acceptable excuse, or if you miss a quiz, and there are no special extra credit assignments for individual students who "just need a few more points to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in blank).

If you need to communicate with me, talk to me before or after class, or during my office hours. However, if you feel you need to contact me through email, put your name, class, red id in the subject line, and use the email above, not Blackboard.

To receive an Incomplete for the course, the student needs to have taken and passed all of the exams and quizzes except the last exam, and signed a form that states the last exam still needs to be taken and sets the date that it needs to be taken..