Sociology 412

Social Construction of Reality

Instructor: Professor Tom Semm Office: AH4217

Email:psemm@mail.sdsu.edu

594-5906

Class Meets: Tuesday 4PM-6:40

Office Hours:

Tuesday 3-4

Texts:

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

Gould, Stephan Jay. The Mismeasure of Man.

Harvey, David. A Brief History of Neoliberalism.

Lewontin, Richard. Biology as Ideology.

Patel, Raj. The Value of Nothing.

Semm, Tom. “Globalization and the Power of the Image.” (Handout)

Course Description:

Traditionally, classes in the social construction of reality examine the ways in which micro, or daily, social interactions create, and recreate, the social world. Since the publication of the work that originally defined this area of inquiry, Peter Berger’s 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 relationships. 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 demystifies reality as given, “out there,” natural and inevitable, as something to which we must conform, and reveals it as a construct and points 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 and who have been the social forces and powerful groups shaping contemporary society. To find the answer to these questions, the first step will be to analyze the social construction of modernity, its primary institutions and ideologies. They are capitalism, science, the “individual” and the “Other.” Next the course will focus on analyzing the impact of technologies of the image, social theories of social control and the ways in which they enable powerful interest groups to create “reality” and its “subjects.”.

“Economics are the method but the object is to change the soul.”

Courses Goals:

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

Evaluation Process:

There are a total of three hundred (300) points for the course. There will be three exams worth seventy (70) points each. The exams will consist of true/false, multiple choice, matching and short answer questions. There will be one four page paper due on the last day of class; the topic(s) for the paper will be given to you several weeks before the paper is due. The paper will be worth ninety (90) points. There may be extra credit opportunities, but they will be dependent upon the socially constructed environment of the class. There also may be unannounced quizzes on the reading material.

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 phone, the internet, no private conversations, no outside reading material, and no 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

I. Social Construction of Modernity

Week 1 Great Transformation Patel I(1 and 6)

Week 2 “Free Market” Patel Part I (3,4, 5)

Week 3 “Individual” Patel Part I (2)

Week 4 “Science” Lewontin 1,2 Gould, Intro

Week 5 **Exam 1 Sep 24**

Week 6 “Other” Gould 2.3.5

III. Social Construction of “Unreality”

Week 7 Social theory, the image and Ewen Part I

“The House of Truth”

Week 8 “Triumph of the Will and Ewen Part II

Lying World”

Week 9 PR/Advertising and Consumerism Ewen Part III

Week 10 **Exam 2 Oct 29**

Week 11 Inventing Reality: The Politics Ewen Part IV and V

of Mass Media

Week 12 Fantasy World of Harvey 1 and 2

Neoliberalism

Week 13 Fantasy World of Harvey 3

Neoliberalism

Week 14 Advertising and the Creation of

Global Consumerism Semm

Week 15 Genetics and “Unfreedom” Lewontin, “The Dream of the human Genome”

“A Story in Textbooks”

Week 16 **Exam 3 Dec 10**