

Richard Lachmann

Sociology 215

Social Origins of the Modern World

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I teach this seminar both for freshman in my university's honors college and as a capstone senior seminar for sociology majors. Both groups of students come to the course with very limited knowledge of early modern Europe; indeed their knowledge of any history beyond that of the U.S. is minimal. The honors freshmen and sociology seniors seem roughly equivalent in their capacity to understand the readings and to write coherent papers.

I view this course as an opportunity to develop my students' sociological imaginations, above all their capacities to envision societies quite different from their own. In any case, I see this seminar as an opportunity to introduce students to the ways in which sociologists and historians think about temporal change as well as to make students aware of some of the ways in which their contemporary world is highly peculiar in the context of past human experience. The initial readings on medieval life are met with shock on the students' part. They are amazed that anyone could survive such harsh, low-tech lives and indeed could find meaning in their physical and social situations. The subsequent readings on family life, magic, and the early development of Western science, and on the growing capacities of governments to track and regulate their subjects offer additional opportunities to discuss how the society in which they live is not the norm in human history.

The course materials spark discussions on the limits of a scientific worldview, the liberating and constraining aspects of modern companionate families, the emotional consequences of the contemporary American approach to death and dying, and whether government efforts to provide social services and to shape their citizens' psyches are empowering or confining (or both simultaneously). Students are affected by the course materials much in the way that are in a good anthropology course: by making them aware of the vast range of ways in which humans think about and act upon the natural world and organize their lives in families, communities and states. However, rather than presenting such alternatives as a cabinet of curiosities (enacted mainly by distant nonwhites), this course makes my students (most of whom are of European ancestry) aware that their ancestors practiced magic, were afraid of ghosts, abused their children, and were cold and hungry most of their lives.

Above all this course seeks to connect undergraduates with the foundations of sociology, a discipline whose founders envisioned a field concerned with tracing the causes and analyzing the consequences of the transition to modern/capitalist/rational bureaucratic society. At a minimum, I hope students come away from this seminar with a metahistory of Western society,

able to see the huge changes in family, ideology, and large organizations over the past millennium. I encourage students to think about questions of causality and to speculate on whether the changes of the past centuries are sustainable. Are there limits to modern industrial society, to large interventionist states and to the ideology of expressive individualism that shaped their upbringings and dominates their hopes for their own futures? Students offer answers to these questions in class discussion and in their papers. While many of their observations are simplistic and disorganized, their broadened social perspectives are ample justification for the course.

This course has a somewhat heavier reading load than most undergraduate sociology courses at Albany. I justify the load to students by pointing out that 11 out of 26 classes are given over to work on the two assigned papers and so they have to read for less than 2/3 of the classes. I also enforce the requirements by giving 10 unannounced quizzes on the assigned readings (see the appendix to the syllabus). Almost all the students do the readings and are prepared to discuss them in class. The readings, while addressing social change in early modern Europe, do not assume much knowledge of history. I find that my students are able to understand most of what they read, and the selections were made to avoid readings that required historical background.

The course works as an effort to broaden students' intellectual horizons. It is liberal arts education in that it attempts to counter our undergraduates' extreme provincialism. Students are amazed to learn that societies have been so different from their own. Many of the students develop empathy for early modern Europeans. Discussions focus on what it must have been like, emotionally and physically, to live in such societies. Students become more critical of their own society, especially of the contemporary approach to death and of the authoritarian aspects of states' efforts to mold their citizens.

I am less successful at getting students to synthesize the different readings. The two papers are designed to encourage students to develop a coherent narrative of historical change that spans the particular arguments of each author. A few students are able to accomplish that task; most fall somewhat or far short of my goal. My efforts over the years to refine the course and to alter my teaching techniques have had little effect on the quality of the papers. The revision process makes the papers better organized and tightens their arguments, but rarely results in greater depth of analysis. This past fall I taught the course for the first time to students in the new honors college. Although those students were freshman, and in the past I had taught this course to senior sociology majors, the papers were far better and showed a capacity to construct historical arguments that I saw only rarely in papers from the senior majors.

The contrasting result from freshman honors students and senior majors are both encouraging and discouraging. It is encouraging in that it suggests the design of this course is one that can foster historical thinking among students. It is discouraging in that four years of education and sustained training in sociology are not enough to prepare those who major in sociology at Albany to benefit as much from this course as the much brighter honors freshman who come to this material with no previous college courses and no previous exposure to sociology.

Sociology 215

Social Origins of the Modern World

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Course Description, Overview and Objectives

This course examines the transformation of individual and governmental attitudes toward family, knowledge and progress, the natural world, and the capacity of humans to be reformed through individual effort and social programs. The readings and class discussion will draw on the work of historians and social scientists who have written for the most part about Western Europe because that is the region of the world where this transformation first occurred and because it remains the main focus of scholarship on “mentalities.”

The questions examined in this course are central to sociology as well as to related disciplines. Students will be exposed to explanations for the transformation from societies that are variously described as traditional, feudal, mechanical, and patrimonial to ones seen as modern, capitalist, organic, bureaucratic and global. Students will gain a basic understanding of the sweep of European social and cultural history over the past 500 years and be introduced to the ways in which social scientists conduct research, evaluate evidence, and construct historical explanations.

Students will refine their writing skills by constructing essays that evaluate evidence and arguments to construct explanations of social change. Students will have the opportunity to revise their essays in response to written comments from the instructor.

Written Assignments

Students will write two essays. The topics and requirements for those essays are listed in this syllabus. Students will have the opportunity to revise both essays.

Students will also take ten in-class quizzes. Quizzes will be given unannounced at the start of class and will be about the content of the reading assigned for that day. The quizzes will be graded pass-fail.

Grading

The final grade will be the average of the grades for the revised first essay and the second essay (50% each) modified by the quizzes as follows: Students who receive passing grades on 9 or more of the quizzes will have their final grade raised by one notch (e.g. from B to B+). Students with 8 passes will not have their grade affected. For each failing grade beyond the first

two, students will have their final grade lowered by one notch for each additional failing quiz (e.g. a student who has 6 passing and 4 failing quiz grades will have their grade lowered by two notches, so that if they had a B it would be reduced to a C+).

Policy on absences and lateness

All writing assignments and revisions must be given in by the deadlines in this syllabus. All late or missed work will be given a grade of F. Students who miss quizzes because they are late or absent from class will receive a grade of F on that quiz. The only exceptions will be for students who can produce (1) a signed letter from a physician stating that they were physically unable to be in class or to do the work by the assigned date, (2) a court order, or (3) an obituary or letter from a funeral director (on funeral home stationary) naming the student as a near and dear relative of the deceased.

Readings

All the readings are on electronic reserve at the library.

[Note: This syllabus is organized on the assumption that the class will meet twice a week for 13 weeks. The scheduled readings and paper assignments can be revised to accommodate a class that meets once or thrice a week.]

Class #1: Introduction to the Course

Class #2: Medieval Society

Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, chapter 1, pp. 1-22.

Robert Muchembled, "A World of Insecurity and Fears" in *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750*, pp. 14-42.

Part I: Family and Individuality

Class #3: The Patriarchal Family

Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, pp. 85-119, 123-132, 216-218.

Class #4: The Rise of the Companionate Marriage

Stone, pp. 325-336, 395-404, 491-507.

Class #5: The Limits of Affective Individualism

Stone, pp. 666-687.

Class #6: The Discovery of Childhood

Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 50-61, 113-119, 128-133, 365-75, 390-415.

Class #7: Death and Individuality

Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 13-19, 27-28, 40-45, 106-110, 128-32, 137-39, 297-305, 314-315, 322-333.

Class #8: Puritan and Modern Fears of Death

David Stannard, "Death and the Puritan Child," pp. 9-29 in *Death In America*.

Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 409-411, 446-455, 473-474, 559-601.01

Write an 8 to 10-page essay that answers the following questions (this should be typed, doubled-spaced, using a font no larger than 12, with margins on all four sides no wider than 1 inch). Do not write separate answers to each question. Instead, write an integrated and coherent essay that answers the questions by constructing an argument based on the readings.

According to Stone and Aries, marriage and family life changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Describe the key changes (how marriage partners were chosen, the roles of husbands and wives in the household, the nature of sexual relations between couples and others, the attitudes and behavior of parents toward their children, beliefs about death and how death reflected upon life). What factors (e.g. the decline of lineage, religion, economics, the state, new emotions and values) account for these changes? Are these changes in family life permanent, particularly since both Stone and Aries see modern social arrangements and attitudes as unstable and emotionally draining? What reasons does Stone give for his pessimism about the companionate marriage and affective individualism, and Aries for his doubts about modern childhood and contemporary attitudes toward death?

Classes #10 and 11: In-class discussions and extra office hours during the week on First Writing Assignment

Class #12: First Writing Assignment Due at the Start of class today.

Class #13: First Writing Assignment Returned with Comments in Class Today

Class #14: Revised First Writing Assignment Due at the Start of Class Today

Part II: Rationality and Industry

Class #15: Medieval Magic

Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 3-77.

Class #16: The Reformation and the Decline of Magic

Thomas, pp. 151-173, 631-668.

Class #17: Printing and the Renaissance

Elizabeth Eisenstein, "The Advent of Printing and the Problem of the Renaissance" in *Past and Present* #45, pp. 19-89.

Class #18: The Pursuit of Technology

Robert Mandrou, *From Humanism to Science*, pp. 32-40.

Carlo Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 167-192.

Part III: New Forms of Social Control

Class #19: The Discovery of Moral Improvement

Samuel Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment*, pp. 21-29, 126-139, 165-221.

Class #20: Law as Moral Code

Douglas Hay, "Property, Authority and the Criminal Law" in *Albion's Fatal Tree*, pp. 17-63.

Class #21: Prisons for the Reform of Body and Mind

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 3-24, 135-156, 231-256, 264-287.

Class #22: The Discovery of Child Neglect

Linda Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives*, pp. 116-167.

Class #23: Discussion of Second Writing Assignment

Write an 8 to 10-page essay that answers the following questions (this is to be typed, doubled-spaced, using a font no larger than 12, with margins on all four sides no wider than 1

inch). Do not write separate answers to each question. Instead, write an integrated and coherent essay that answers the questions by constructing an argument based on the readings.

How have governments' ambitions for controlling their citizens' behaviors expanded since the Renaissance? What evidence do the authors you read in the third part of this course present for such an expansion? To what extent have those ambitions built upon Europeans' belief in the expanding possibilities for progress brought on by the availability of printed books, the discoveries of explorers and scientists, and the widening use of technological innovations? In what ways have these social control projects failed or produced unintended consequences? Answer these questions in a coherent essay that draws on at least three of the readings from this course.

Classes #24 and 25: In-class discussions and extra office hours during the week on Second Writing Assignment

Class #26: Second writing assignment is due in Professor Lachmann's office by noon today.

This paper will be returned within two days to allow students to make revisions that will be due on the date of the final exam.

Quizzes

In-class Quiz for class # 3

1. What are two ways that the Open Lineage Family is different from the nuclear family?
2. What does Stone see as the main cause for the decline of the Open Lineage Family?
3. What member of the Restricted Patriarchal Nuclear Family got to exercise the power once the lineage lost control over families?

In-class Quiz for class #5

1. How did the emotional life of families change after 1790?
2. What does Stone see as one of the main causes for the nineteenth-century changes in English families?
3. List two reasons for the twentieth-century return of permissiveness in families.

In-class Quiz for class #6

1. How did clothing indicate that children were regarded as adults?
2. How were seventeenth-century children supposed to be educated to develop their moral sense?
3. How did domesticity affect relations between children and adults?

In-class Quiz for class #8

1. Why were Puritan children terrified of death?
2. List two ways in which twentieth-century attitudes toward death are different from death rituals in past centuries?

In-class Quiz for class # 15

1. Give two examples of how the medieval Catholic Church used magic.
2. What are two ways in which the Reformation affected the use of magic in religious rituals?

In-class Quiz for class #17

1. How did printing affect the corruption of texts?
2. How did printing help the advance of scientific knowledge?

In-class Quiz for class #18

1. Give two examples from Mandrou of how European exploration from Columbus to Magellan gave rise to new scientific discoveries.
2. List three of the mechanical innovations described by Cipolla.

In-class Quiz for class #20

1. Give one example of what Hay means by majesty.
2. Give one reason why eighteenth-century English people saw the law as just.

In-class Quiz for class #21

1. What are two ways that punishment changed in the nineteenth century?

In-class Quiz for class #22

1. Did social workers believe that child neglect was the result of poverty or the fault of parents?