Fall 2010

REIMAGINING THE UNITED STATES: MODIFYING THE AMERICAN DREAM

POLS/SOC/ENTREP 497
Saturdays: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

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NO TEXTBOOOK

INTRODUCTION:

Various definitions of the concept of the American Dream and its several socio-cultural and political-economic drivers will be studied in this course. We will explore what effect attempting to fulfill the dream has had on America's domestic and international policies. The class will discuss the desirability of modifying the American Dream and address the consequent reshaping of America into a more ecologically sustainable and ethically sound nation.

During the second session, we will read in class my two-page "preamble," which will furnish us with various strands or directions to pursue further during the entirety of the semester.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS COURSE

- **We will explore some influences on the evolution of the concept:**

  As a class, we want to delve into the "psyche" of America, into the cultural, political, and sociological "myths" that have shaped the United States. We shall explore the various ideologies that guide Americans in their "pursuit of happiness." The class may discuss what prompts Americans in their expectations from their government (the less the better) and the missions they want their other institutions to serve – in brief, what kind of life Americans generally think is worth living.

- **We shall critically evaluate today's domestic and international forces:**

  Special interests and large global corporations exert so much pressure on all the three branches of the U.S. government that one wonders whether this republic is any more (what Lincoln described it to be) "for the people, by the people and of the people." We shall discuss in what ways the U.S. government has become an instrument to be manipulated by those who have power and wealth rather than

being the manifestation of average citizens' collective will. We may raise the issue whether one can legitimately describe the U.S. as a plutocracy or oligarchy. We shall also study how other countries view the United States and how we relate with *them*.

- **This course will be taught as a seminar:**

  What this characteristic of the course means is that lecturing will be minimal in the delivery of this course. The main responsibility for learning, gathering information, and doing thorough research on various topics relevant to the course will rest with the students. Oral presentations by students on various topics, buttressed by secondary research, will be one mode of peer learning. My role will be mainly to guide, coach, monitor, critique, and evaluate student effort.

- **Teaching and learning are revolutionary activities:**

  I believe that teaching involves more than just giving information; it encourages radical (going to the roots) thinking and debate, regardless of the subject matter. Teaching and learning at the *university*, in my judgment, challenge mainstream or accepted thinking. Just imparting information or only building skills constitutes training, not education, as far as I'm concerned, and is the surest way of making oneself obsolete or outmoded. University education should transform both the teacher and the taught. This is the position in critical pedagogy I uphold.

POLICIES

(1) Tardiness and absences are discouraged: Each unexcused absence will cost 10 points.

(2) The presenter should make every effort to finish the report within the allotted time.

(3) Oral presentation grades are non-negotiable.

(4) Use of standard, "educated" English is required for all assignments. (Proofread carefully before submission).

(5) Once presentation dates are set, students will be expected to stick to the schedule.

EVALUATION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

This research assignment will not be graded (I want to find out the depth and the breadth of your research skills, as you enter this class):

Find 5 articles/commentaries regarding the following provisions in the US Constitution and **ANNOTATE** them:

1. Presidential veto power
2. Two senators for every state
3. Electors/Electoral College
4. Right to bear arms
5. "Promote the general welfare"

Look for 5 articles on the following issues arising out of the Monroe Doctrine; again provide **annotations**:

6. US interventions south of its border
7. Current global presence of the US military
8. Ideas/ideologies associated with the English Civil War (similar and dissimilar to those in the American War of Independence)
9. Is the US a "revolutionary" nation?

Research 5 sources on the impact of the following "enlightenment" figures on the Founding Fathers (**Make sure that you annotate them**):

10. Adam Smith
11. Hobbes
12. Locke
13. Descartes
14. Rousseau
15. Voltaire
16. La Fayette

<u>The First Assignment (100 points):</u>

You will write an essay (about 500 to 700 words) with a thesis or core idea about *your* conception of the American Dream. How has the American-Dream "myth" affected *you*? You may want to consider the following aspects/dimensions among others:

1) Has your idea of the American Dream evolved, changed, over the years?
2) Are you aware of the influences or forces that have helped to shape it?
3) What do you think is the American Dream of your parents, friends, and other relatives?
4) Link the general concept of the A.D. with *your individual* version/variation.

One of my purposes in asking you to write this impromptu essay is to get an idea of how you write – correctness of language, development of a thesis or a core idea, and coherence and cohesion as a sustained piece of writing.

<u>The Second Assignment (400 points):</u>

Book Summary

Each student "randomly" selects a book from the list provided by me. The written book report should consist of two parts: (a) a summary and (b) a critical evaluation.

The report (the two parts together) should be approximately 2,000 words, 10 pages (typed double-spaced).

1. Select **only** scholarly books, published preferably after 2000.
2. Do not choose novels, poetry, or plays (no light literature).
3. You must also include your own, **original** critical evaluation of the book, not from amazon.com. The report must clearly indicate that you have read and reflected upon the book.
4. The summary will be written, **and** presented in class orally.
5. An **annotated** bibliography of 10 articles related to the topic/thesis of the book should be attached.
6. A question and answer period will follow.

The student gives a <u>hard copy</u> of the report to the instructor and sends an electronic copy to each student in the class, <u>sufficiently in advance</u> so that everybody will have enough time to read it before it is presented orally to the class

<u>The Third Assignment (300 points):</u>

All the students in the class will read the following core "documents" and familiarize themselves with the associated events. Each student will bring to class *five* credible analytical sources regarding each event. We'll discuss them in class:

1) The Declaration of Independence
2) The Constitution of the United States with the Bill of Rights
3) The Monroe Doctrine
4) The Gettysburg Address
5) The Emancipation Proclamation
6) The concept of "Manifest Destiny"
7) Suffragist "Manifesto"
8) Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal"
9) Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech
10) The Tea Party Movement
11) The Homestead Act
12) Oklahoma Land Rush
13) The GI Bill

Every student will write an analytical/critical essay and will also give an oral presentation on one of the events/documents of their choice. This could be a partnered project; two students may get together to select one event. The students should demonstrate in their

reports their understanding of the life-changing significance of these core events for Americans and of the contribution of these events to the shaping of the American Dream.

My grade and evaluation of the oral portion of the report will take into account how competently and confidently you field the questions from the class.

<u>The Fourth Assignment (200 points):</u>

Choose **one** out of the following alternatives:

(1) An essay related to the theme of our course, the American Dream (In this essay, you will incorporate your ideas about reshaping the American Dream and the steps needed to achieve that objective.)

(2) A survey or a (multi)media project

(3) A book solely of your choice (again, related to the theme of the course).

(4) A review and analysis of some documentaries, or movies, or of the depictions in "art" (of the American Dream)

(5) An in-depth interview with someone from another race or another socio-economic class about **their** idea of the American Dream (with your commentary or analysis and reflections)

(6) An exploration of the influence of Church or School or Television on the shaping of the American Dream (Your original thinking is required and encouraged.)

(7) Any project for which you seek pre-approval from me

The only requirement for this assignment is that it must result in a *written* paper.

Note: Total freedom of expression for every