Dr. Amy D'Unger (School of History and Sociology)
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Office Hours: Lots! View available appointments and schedule one @ https://gatech.gradesfirst.com
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Introduction:

This course will examine a variety of issues considered to be “social problems.” In order to do so, we must first understand how particular issues come to be considered “problems” in the first place, while other issues do not. We will begin with the constructionist perspective, which centers around one question: why do we recognize some social conditions as “problems” while simultaneously ignoring other conditions? Additionally, why do we recognize some social conditions as problems at one time, while during a later period we do not consider them problems?

After examining how things become social problems, we will be considering a variety of social issues in detail, including criminal justice and mass incarceration, the heroin epidemic in the United States, access to voting and racial redistricting, environmental injustice, and human trafficking. To do this, we will be using the latest social science research and “real world” examples from the most reputable journalistic sources (e.g., the New York Times and the Washington Post).

Area E Approved Learning Outcome:

- Students will demonstrate the ability to describe the social, political, and economic forces that influence social behavior.

Explain how the course satisfies the learning outcome:

This course will focus on how problems are socially constructed, how power and stratification impact which issues come to be recognized as problems, and a series of current social problems. Students will learn how social, political, and economic forces influence social behavior through an examination of such subjects as access to voting; drugs and incarceration; and problems with the environment.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to explain how problems are socially constructed.
- Students will compare and contrast major social problems impacting the United States.
- Students will analyze how social, political, and/or economic forces shape the American response to social problems.

Text: There is one REQUIRED book for this class.


This book is available at the BARNES AND NOBLE BOOKSTORE in Tech Square. You can also purchase it online, but please make sure to get the correct publication year (2015, see above). All other readings for the semester are available ONLINE. They are indicated with a bibliographic entry for the reading and, in some cases, a web link. You can access these readings via the Canvas
site for this class. Go to Modules > Course Readings. Many of the readings are excerpted from recent books written in the area. Because they are not online, you can access a PDF version in the same Canvas folder as the online resources (“Course Readings”).

If you are interested in reading more, a bibliography of the books used in the class is included in Appendix I. **PLEASE NOTE THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PURCHASE THESE BOOKS!**

Course Requirements:

(1) **Writing Assignments**: Students will complete two short written assignments, with due dates noted on the syllabus. Each paper is to be approximately 3 – 4 pages long and will be posted in the “Assignments” section of Canvas. **Late assignments will not be accepted.** The assignments will cumulatively count for 40% of your grade.

**Assignment #1**: Due Monday, January 28th (20%)
**Assignment #2**: Due Monday, April 1st (20%)

(2) **Examinations**: There will be two examinations for this course. The midterm exam is scheduled for Friday, February 15th in class and the final exam is scheduled for Friday, April 26th from 11:20 AM – 2:10 PM. Each of these exams will consist of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions, which will require students to draw on course readings, lectures, and discussions. The midterm examination will count for 25% of your grade and the final examination will count for 30% of your grade (**EXAMS = 55% TOTAL**).

(3) **Attendance and Class Participation**: On the following pages is a schedule of the readings required for the course. **You are expected to have read the assigned material prior to the class.** Discussion will correspond to the material in the readings, but may not review it in detail. Some days may include guest speakers or films and will not cover the readings at all, so both reading and class attendance are important. “Class participation” includes two elements: **ATTENDANCE** and **PARTICIPATING IN CLASS DISCUSSION**.

I will take attendance most class periods. Excused absences will not be counted against you. Excused absences will be granted if there is documentation of attendance at an academic event, participation in an athletic event, illness, or family emergency. **Other excused absences will be granted at my discretion.**

**In addition to attending class, you must participate in class discussion.** Using attendance as the baseline grade (e.g., a student who attends 75% of the class sessions will have a 75% base grade), good class discussion participation can adjust the final participation grade upward by up to 5%. For example, a student with a 75% base participation grade who consistently has informed things to say in class could improve her participation grade to 80%. The final class participation grade (attendance + class discussion) will count for 5% of your final grade.

**Guidelines for Class Discussions:**

1. Feel free to speak your mind; however, be respectful of other students and the instructors. We will be discussing potentially controversial topics at times.

2. Because this is a large class, please raise your hand to be called on, so I can make sure that a variety of students can participate.

3. If you disagree with someone, respond to the argument or idea and not to the person who said it. This keeps the discussions from getting personal.

4. Be careful of generalizing from personal experience. While our personal experiences can inform our sociological discussions, the way we experience or perceive a particular event or experience may vary.
If at any time you feel that outside issues (family, medical, financial, mental health, etc.) are hampering your ability to be successful in this class, please come and talk to me! I can only assist if I know about the situation—in the degree that you feel comfortable discussing it—BEFORE it has impacted your grade.

Statement on Diversity and Inclusion:

The Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts supports the Georgia Institute of Technology’s commitment to creating a campus free of discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or veteran status. We further affirm the importance of cultivating an intellectual climate that allows us to better understand the similarities and differences of those who constitute the Georgia Tech community, as well as the necessity of working against inequalities that may also manifest here as they do in broader society.

Accommodating Disabilities:

If you have or acquire any sort of condition that may require special accommodation(s), please inform me AS SOON AS POSSIBLE (e.g., not the day of an exam) so that we may make the appropriate arrangements. Proper documentation from the Office of Disability Services will be required. Please contact them to get more information on available services and accommodations, as well as documentation requirements. They can be reached via the web at http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu. Please note that there are no retroactive accommodations.

Academic Conduct:

All students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the policies of the Georgia Tech Honor Code with respect to behavior and academic honesty. Anyone engaging in acts that violate these policies, such as cheating, will be penalized. For more information on the Honor Code, see the Office of Student Integrity website at www.osi.gatech.edu and the text of the honor code at www.policylibrary.gatech.edu/student-affairs/academic-honor-code. If you are not familiar with what constitute plagiarism, ASK! Being uninformed of the policies does not absolve you from the responsibility of following them!

Make-Up Policy:

Permission is needed to make-up an exam or assignment. If you are going to miss an exam or assignment deadline, please make every effort to notify me ahead of time and to gather appropriate material to justify your absence (e.g., a note from your physician if you are ill). A mutually convenient time will be arranged for you to make up the exam. Make up exams will only be allowed in a situation of an excused absence (e.g., Georgia Tech sporting event, illness, family emergency, etc.).

Use of Technology Policy:

The use of tablets and computers is permitted in class ONLY IF USED FOR CLASS WORK and DOES NOT DISTRACT OTHER STUDENTS OR ME. Yes, I know that when you giggle while I’m talking about mass incarceration, you’re actually looking at Instagram. Students may lose the privilege of using electronics in the classroom if they prove to be disruptive. NO TEXTING. Period. Zip. Put your phone away. It can wait. YES, I CAN SEE YOU.

Those who violate this policy will be asked to leave the class that day and will not be counted as in attendance.
How Can I Succeed in This Course?

(1) Attend class and be on time—there is nothing more disruptive to your learning than missing class and there is nothing more disruptive to other students than individuals who come in late and interrupt the class discussion.

(2) Do the reading!!! It will help you to participate in class and write quality papers, and it ESSENTIAL for your success on the exams.

(3) Notes, notes, notes. Take notes on each of the readings. They do not have to be in great detail, but should extract, synthesize, and summarize the piece. What is the main point of the article/chapter? What is a good example of the main point? How can this be integrated with other material discussed in class and the texts? etc. etc. These notes will be valuable study tools for the exams. Also, study in groups—others may pick up on material that you overlooked, and vice-versa.

(4) The reading load varies for each class. Anticipate days with heavier reading and START EARLY, if possible.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS (SUBJECT TO REVISIONS/ADDITIONS)

Part I: The Construction of Social “Problems”

January 7 Introduction and Welcome READ THE SYLLABUS (YES, SERIOUSLY…)

January 9 Sociology and Social Problems Social Problems (pp. 1 – 14)


January 14 The Social Construction of Problems: How Does it Happen?


January 16 Moral Panics, Statistics, and Censorship Social Problems (pp. 136 – 152)

Part II: The Origins of Policy—Voting

January 18 Some Context: What Kind of Society Do We Have?


January 21 No Class- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
January 23  What is a “Democracy?”


January 25  Elections and Voting


January 28  The Fight to Vote

ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE


Keyes, Scott. 2013. Seven Voting Reforms Other Countries Have Used to Boost Their Turnout Rate. Think Progress. (https://thinkprogress.org/seven-voting-reforms-other-countries-have-used-to-boost-their-turnout-rate-87926709a576#.tytefx4ux)


January 30  Who Gets to Vote?


February 1  Voter Fraud


February 4  
Voter Suppression


February 6  
Voter Suppression


February 8  
Drawing the Lines


February 11  
Politics and Partisan Bias


February 13  
Ratf**ked


February 15  
MIDTERM EXAMINATION
Part III: Crime and Incarceration Policies and Their Origins

February 18  From Voting to Crime


February 20  The Politics of Punishment


February 22  The Making of Mass Incarceration


February 25  The Social Costs of Incarceration


February 27  The Individual Costs of Incarceration


March 1  Who Benefits from Incarceration?


March 4  The Prison Industrial Complex


### Part IV: Manufacturing Prisoners: The War on Drugs and the Heroin Epidemic

**March 6**

The War on Drugs


**March 8**

Race and the War on Drugs


**March 11**

Critiques of the War on Drugs


**March 13**

The Origins of the Heroin Problem


**March 15**

The Blossoming of OxyContin


**March 18 – 22**

No Classes- Spring Break

**March 25**

When the Well Runs Dry


**Part V: Trafficking and Modern Slavery**

**March 27**

**Trafficking in People, Not Drugs**


**March 29**

**Trafficking in the United States**


**April 1**

**Atlanta’s Role in Trafficking**

ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE


**April 3**

**Policy Responses to Trafficking**


**Part VI: Inequality and the Environment**

**April 5**

**Exploiting Uncertainty: The Environment as a Social Problem**

Social Problems (pp. 191 – 207)

**April 8**

**Inequality and the Environment**

Social Problems (pp. 217 – 225)

**April 10**

**Politics, Waste, and “Cleanliness”**


April 12  Waste and Race: A Linking of Social Movements


April 15  Why Don’t You Just Move?


April 17  The Social Construction of “Hazard”


April 19  Environmental Justice


April 22  Wrapping Up

April 26  FINAL EXAMINATION**

**The final exam will be held in-class on Friday, April 26th from 11:20 AM – 2:10 PM. This is the time slot assigned by the Registrar’s Office. Please notify me if you have any conflicts.

How the Final Grade Will be Determined:***

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<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Assignments</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>80 – 89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>70 – 79</td>
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<tr>
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***Note: I do not round up (seriously). An 89.9% is a B. No ifs, ands, buts, or “I’ll fail out of Georgia Tech if you don’t give me an A” stories, please! If you need an A (or a B or a C), earn it!

If you are taking the class Pass/Fail, the minimum grade to pass the class is a 60.0% (a D).
APPENDIX I

NOTE THAT YOU DO NOT NEED TO PURCHASE THESE AND WE WILL BE READING ONLY SMALL EXCERPTS THAT ARE PROVIDED TO YOU VIA CANVAS!


