Syllabus: Sociology 294

Special Topics: Sociology of Neoliberalism and Biopolitics

Howard Winant
Winter Quarter 2021
T 100-3:50pm (Virtual Class)
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Office Hours: Thurs, 100-300pm, via Zoom
Schedule Zoom appointment via calendly.com/hwinant

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is the dominant political-economic/cultural project of our time. It is important to get a sociological handle on it. As a concept it is full of contradictions, widely used and misused, and highly ideological. Unquestionably, though, neoliberalism in practice involves increasing wealth/income inequality, massive repression, and assaults on workers, people of color, women, and LGBT people. Theoretically based upon the "disembedding" of the economy from the social -- that is, the claim that markets are autonomous, self-regulating institutions -- neoliberalism is grounded in anti-statist ideology. It challenges regulation of the market and seeks to undo numerous forms of collective social provision. However, neoliberalism is also a political project (or set of such projects) that targets and seeks control over the state. Its adherents and practitioners are therefore not reluctant to harness the state to the needs of capital.

Neoliberalism is not "merely" political-economic in orientation. It is also "biopolitical," to use Michel Foucault's term. Committed to a cultural politics of possessive individualism and market-driven competition, it upholds certain concepts of identity/difference, rejecting and repressing others. Neoliberalism abhors cooperation, collectivity, and social justice. "There is no such thing as 'society,'" Margaret Thatcher famously declared, expressing a fundamental neoliberal principle. Social-psychologically speaking, neoliberalism might be described as "introjecting" atomistic ideas and discourses of the self, and once again, repudiating other concepts of identity. Thus we find links to repression (both personal and political), racism, heteropatriarchy, sovereignty, and the Hobbesian bellum omnium contra omnes (the "war of each against all"), deeply embedded within it.

I'm trying to keep this "special topics" course as present-oriented as possible, although we occasionally take on a historical topic. In ten short weeks we can aspire only to an initial theoretical take on this complex subject. The course does offer a chance, however, to examine some key large-scale political trends, to relate our pressing research interests and theoretical orientations to these trends, and to discuss and debate some of the main issues confronting sociology, and 21st-century society at large, in the present period.

This syllabus is available on GauchoSpace.

It is also available on Professor Winant's website:
Key readings for the course are linked to the syllabus and linked on GauchoSpace as well. These are generally articles, essays, or chapter excerpts, but sometimes longer-form stuff. We don't have time for a big dip in the waters of neoliberal theory, so we focus mostly on secondary literature. A list of Recommended Readings is appended to this syllabus, so those who wish can dive deeper there. Because we are faced with the COVID19 pandemic, I am not ordering books for purchase or placing books on reserve at the UCSB library. Books may still be purchased online, of course. (Permit me to discourage use of Amazon, which in my view is a predatory monopoly. I recommend Chaucer's Books (https://www.chaucersbooks.com/; 805.682.6787; use curbside pickup and wear a mask!). If you prefer to order for shipping I recommend Powell's Books (https://www.powells.com/).

Key readings are associated with each class session, because there is a neoliberal "theme" treated in each session. But there is a lot of good stuff in the recommended list, and it overlaps in significant ways, so you are encouraged to pick and choose.

Try to stretch yourself: if you are very political-economy oriented, try dealing with identity politics and biopolitics a bit. If you are "crime and punishment:" oriented, think about labor or sexuality or gender politics. If you are a race/gender/sexuality person, think about the welfare state. Etc. etc.

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APPROACH TO VIRTUAL TEACHING AND LEARNING; WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The course will take place synchronously as a virtual seminar. I will post an introductory rap on GauchoSpace (not a lecture but a brief overview) of each class session's topic. This will be available (asynchronously) by 500pm each Monday before class.

Short reaction papers are required every week. These are brief reviews of assigned reading, c. 1000 words. They are submitted via the GauchoSpace Forum app, no later than 500pm each Sunday before the start of class. The Forum offers us all a chance to see and even discuss each other's RPs. RPs are not graded but I will provide comments on students' RPs via email. A sample RP is provided on GauchoSpace.

Class time will be devoted to discussion. I will have questions prepared, but students' reaction papers will also be the source for questions.

Review essay -- c. 2000 words (no more than 8pp) on the theme, "Dealing with Neoliberalism/Biopolitics in My Sociological Research." This is a reflective essay on your research interests and how they relate to key themes in the course. It is meant to be a "working paper"; while you should be coherent and polished in your presentation, and refer to sources as much as possible, you may also point to future work you want to do, and be speculative if you wish. In preparing the review essay, consider the dynamic relationship between neoliberalism/biopolitics and the direction of your work. Some examples: criminal justice (incarceration, profiling, white-collar crime, etc.) and
biopolitics; comparing austerity and structural adjustment policies (SAP) politics across cases: Africa, Greece, Puerto Rico, Detroit; neoliberal individualism and "identity politics": racial formation, LGBT issues, "gender trouble," etc.; how is rightwing and authoritarian politics popularized and why does it receive support? (Thinking here of nativism, Islamophobia, assaults on the welfare state, repressive religious politics, charter schools...). This paper is graded. It is due Sunday Feb 7 before 600pm. It can be submitted via GauchoSpace or by email attachment to hwinant@soc.ucsb.edu.

Final paper -- c. 3000 words (no more than 12 pp) -- on a topic of student choice. This paper may be a more worked-out and in-depth version of the midterm Review essay. Discuss your current research interests in light of their relationship to the themes of neoliberalism and biopolitics. Standard documentation of sources is expected. The final paper is due Thursday March 18 before 600pm. It is graded. It can be submitted on GauchoSpace or by email attachment to hwinant@soc.ucsb.edu.

You are encouraged to consult with instructor Howard Winant on both the review essay and the final paper.

NOTE ON READINGS

Required readings are listed below in the class schedule. They are mostly journal articles or book excerpts, but there are some video and audio materials as well. All required readings are available online. An additional and necessarily partial list of recommended readings is included at the bottom of this syllabus.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES
(Readings will be discussed on the date listed)

Week 1, Jan 5, 2021
Introduction to the course; self-introduction and reflection

Week 2, Jan 12

NEOLIBERALISM AND SOCIAL THEORY

*Linking the political-economic and identity politics dimensions of neoliberalism*


Week 3, Jan 19

BIOPOLITICS

*Annie Menzel writes,* "According to Michel Foucault, "biopolitics" designates modern states' exercise of "positive power" to ensure the vitality of the population: for example,
optimal birth and death rates, sanitary environments, public health, social insurance, and disease control. At the same time, he argues, biopolitics has ushered in unprecedented forms of violence, exclusion, and even death for groups and individuals who are cast-generally in racialized terms-as threats to the population."


Week 4, Jan 26

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE EMPIRE STATE/GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
In many countries neoliberalism has replaced democracy with the "state of exception": Indonesia, Chile, India, Eastern Europe are just some examples.


Week 5, Feb 2

THE NEOLIBERAL STATE: VIOLENCE AND BIOPower
State violence and punishment; surveillance; state of exception

NO RP due this week. Work on your Review Essay.


SUN, FEB 7 -- REVIEW ESSAY DUE ON GAUCHOSPACE BEFORE 600PM

Week 6, Feb 9

MARXISM, LABOR, CLASS, AND NEOLIBERALISM
Rethinking production and reproduction


David Harvey. "Reading Marx's Capital with David Harvey" (podcasts from Brazil: in English with Portuguese subtitles); http://davidharvey.org/2018/11/new-podcast-david-harveys-anti-capitalist-chronicles/ [This is a podcast series]


Week 7, Feb 16

RACE
The dynamics of race (and racial capitalism) tie together neoliberalism and biopolitics, much more than is usually recognized.


Week 8, Feb 23

SEX/GENDER
As McCormack and Salmenniemi write: "Daily life is now the production, surveillance and management of information about and experience of health scares, risks of illness, economic crises, local and global migration, job insecurity, intensification of national security, and a rise in a rhetoric of fear fuelled by (often illegal) wars and 'terrorist' attacks. Such a sense of vulnerability may lead to what Berlant describes as an exhaustion from constant change, uncertainty and unpredictability of economic, social, cultural and biological life."


Week 9, March 2

NEOLIBERALISM, BIOPOLITICS, AND PLANET EARTH
Naomi Klein says: [T]here is no way to confront the climate crisis as a technocratic problem, in isolation. It must be seen in the context of austerity and privatisation, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all. The connections and intersections between them are glaring, and yet so often resistance to them is highly compartmentalised. The anti-austerity people rarely talk about climate change, the climate change people rarely talk about war or occupation.

[This article is paywalled, so it is available on GauchoSpace]


[This is a podcast]

Week 10, March 9

No RP due this week. Work on your final paper.

Course review; what about the recommended readings?

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March 18 -- FINAL PAPER DUE ON GAUCHOSPACE BEFORE 600PM

Final paper due: For convenience you will be able to upload this paper on GauchoSpace. You can also send it as an email attachment to hwinant@soc.ucsb.edu.

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RECOMMENDED READING (a very partial list of related, long-form readings):


