Sociology seeks to introduce us to the non-obvious aspects of social relations and interactions. It teaches us to look beyond the taken-for-granted meanings of social living, to use common sense but also to go beyond it. In pursuing sociological knowledge one encounters many vigorous debates and there is much controversy as participants to the debates all advance their own theories and explanations for the way things are. Because the issues we treat are so close to our conceptions of ourselves and our societies, controversies in sociology touch all of us in myriad ways. We all presume we ‘know’ what we are talking about so sociology problematizes ways of knowing, for example, theology vs. science, and suggests that certainty may not always be that certain. A distinctive feature of sociological thinking is its insistence on the claim that social behaviour is more socially structured than it is individually volitional. Human behaviour is just too patterned to be the result of happenstance, but this is not easily accepted by the population at large given the culture that socializes them to an individualistic ethic. In all of this the concept of ideology stands front and centre. As filters through which we grasp social reality, ideologies are mobilized belief systems and can come in the form of economic, political, religious, national, educational and even deeply held racial and gendered ‘truths.’

In this course we will explore some of these ideologies and the controversies they inform. We will define sociology broadly as the study of social order, social disorder and social change, and in this context we will examine ideologies of order or conservative ideologies, ideologies of disorder or anarchist ideologies, and ideologies of change or radical ideologies. In sociology the functionalist theory of social inequality is best understood as ideologically conservative, while the conflict theory of social inequality could be understood as ideologically radical. While functionalism sees inequality as natural, integrative and functional, conflict theory is diametrically opposed, sees inequality as socially engineered and potentially disruptive. So
where do we stand? What, for example, is our government’s take on the inequality that characterizes First Nations individuals and communities?

**PLEASE NOTE:** This course is taught the old fashioned way. There is no course web site, no course web page, and I do not post notes or lectures on the web. I deliver traditional lectures from the front of the class and there is a good deal of class discussion. Students are expected to come to class having done the readings for the day. I don’t know what cold calling is so as lectures develop be prepared to be called on to answer questions on the relevant materials.

As the course title indicates, this course deals with controversial issues and requires that we all must come to the encounter with open minds. If we fail to do so, the course objectives will not be met. We will be discussing themes that are historical, political, economic, religious, even social and interpersonal. In all of these exchanges I will presume we are all adults and no topic is out of bounds as long as we are respectful of one another. Finally, please know that I am not interested in hearing anyone’s opinions, but look forward to hearing your arguments. The distinction will be made clear on the first day of class. Finally, the in-class test and the final exam will cover material from the readings, lectures, and tutorial sessions so if you choose to miss classes or tutorials you do so at your own peril.

**Learning objectives:**
1. to get the students to move beyond common sense understandings of their world;
2. to get the students writing in a sophisticated manner about issues of social import;
3. to get the students to appreciate the importance of theoretical thinking;
4. to get the students to transcend an individualistic and volitional mind-set, and to appreciate the importance of structural explanations of social behaviour.

**Learning outcomes:**
1. The student will have developed some clear critical reading, thinking and analytical skills;
2. The student will learn the difference between reading for information and reading for style;
3. The student will appreciate the importance of keeping abreast of the news;
4. The student will develop library research skills;
5. The student will learn how to construct an argument and defend it;
6. The student will learn the importance of logic, evidence, clarity and consistency in arguing;
7. The student will learn that Canada and the United States are not the centre of the universe.

**Required readings**

The required readings for this course are all included in the official course pack, which is for sale in the book store. The table of contents follows:
Course Pack
Controversies in Sociology (SOC 1026F 001)
Professor Antón Allahar


McIntosh, Peggy. 1998. “White privilege and male privilege; a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies.” (pp. 94-105) in *Race, Class and Gender; an Anthology*. 3rd ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (eds). Toronto: Wadsworth.


Assignments

Assignment #1: in-class, mid-term multiple choice and True-False format (30%).

Assignment #2: 1500-2000 word (6-8 pages) written essay (30%).

Assignment #3: Final exam in exam period; short answer and essay format (40%).

Essay assignment: The essay is due in class no later than November 28th. In this assignment you are to do three things: (a) choose a controversial course-related theme that you will clear with the Teaching Assistant, (b) show how someone who thinks individualistically would understand and defend it, and (c) critique that argument from the point of view of someone who thinks sociologically (structurally). Be sure to keep the focus sociological by using such key concepts as social order, social disorder, social change, social control, social inequality (various dimensions), ideology and power.

Syllabus

Week 1: (September 4)

Thinking Sociologically: questions of theory, method and empiricism.
What is structural thinking? Ways of knowing; belief vs. ‘truth.’ Ontology and epistemology.
“What do you know for sure?”


Week 2: (September 11)

What are theories and ideologies?
What is the relationship between theory and ideology?
Theories and ideologies of order as conservative (functionalism, racism);
Theories and ideologies of disorder as disruptive (anarchism, terrorism);
Theories and ideologies of change as radical (feminism, Marxism)
reformist ideologies (liberal feminism, Afrocentrism)


Week 3: (September 18)
Economic controversies

“Is globalization the solution to world poverty or the cause of world poverty?”
“Where would the Third World be without us?”
Theories of social and economic change: social evolutionism, modernization and dependency theory.
Economic ideologies (free trade, protectionism, neo-liberalism, socialism)
Controversial practice: outsourcing of jobs.


Video: TVO Best lecture, “Why is the whole world not developed?”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N6HEW9wnT8

Week 4: (September 25)
Political controversies

“Is liberal democracy right for all peoples?”
“Is democracy a prerequisite for economic development?”
Theories of political organization (democracy, monarchy, communism)

Controversial practice: government spying on its own citizens (Edward Snowden) in the name of defending democracy.

Controversial question: should the Queen be the head of state in an independent, democratic Canada?

Reading: C.B. Macpherson. 1965. The real world of democracy. (Chapters 1-2).


Week 5: (October 02)
Religious controversies

“Did Charles Darwin kill God?” “Should religion be taught in schools?”

Controversial take on religion: Religion as false consciousness, as the opiate of the masses.

Controversial religious ideologies: (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism)

Week 6: (October 09)
Gender controversies

“Are men really from Mars and women really from Venus?”
“How does mainstream feminism regard the woman of colour?”
**Controversial practice:** women given preference by the courts in custody hearings.
**Controversial questions:** should women be given special consideration to compensate for centuries of discrimination? Is pay equity for women anti-meritocratic?

Reading: McIntosh, Peggy. 1998. “White privilege and male privilege; a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies.” (pp. 94-105) in Race, Class and Gender; an Anthology. 3rd ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (eds). Toronto: Wadsworth.

Week 7: (October 16)
Sexual orientation controversies

“Is homosexuality biologically driven or a personal choice?” “Are homophobes insecure about their own sexuality?”
**Controversial practices:** legalization of same sex marriages; gay adoption.
**Controversial questions:** should a trans-gendered male athlete be permitted to compete against females?

Reading: Gluckman, Any and Betsy Reed. 1998. “Where has gay liberation gone?” (pp. 442-446) in Race, Class and Gender; an Anthology. 3rd ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (eds). Toronto: Wadsworth.

Week 8: (October 23)
In-class Test

Week 9: (October 30)
No class. Fall mid-term break.

Week 10: (November 06)
Racial and ethnic controversies

“Do biological races exist?” “Black and white words.”
“Are black people less intelligent than white people?”
Controversial practice: racial profiling.

**Controversial question:** should police collect crime statistics by ‘race’?


**Video:** Rushton-Suzuki debate

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**Week 11: (November 13)**

**Ethno-Cultural controversies**

“Are Muslims assimilable to Canadian society?”

“Is wishing someone ‘merry Christmas’ an offence to a non-Christian?”

**Controversial practice:** the Residential School system and the Native Canadians.

**Controversial question:** Is assimilation synonymous with integration?

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**Week 12: (November 20) (NOTE: The essay assignment is due today).**

**Immigration controversies**

“Does Canada’s immigration law (dis)favour certain ethnic groups?”

“Is Canada multicultural or mono-cultural and multi-ethnic?”

**Controversial practice:** the point system

**Controversial question:** should those with money to invest be fast tracked into Canada?


**Videos:** “Who gets in?” “El Contrato.”

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**Week 13: (November 27).**

**Educational controversies**

“What is the idea of the university?”

“Grade inflation and the disengagement compact.” “Dumbing down and the helicopter parent.” Should everyone go to university? Is it elitist to suggest not?

**Controversial practice:** bell curving grades.

**Controversial question:** “Should universities be sites of job training?”


Summary and conclusions. Exam review.

A Note on Plagiarism:

Students must write their assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major scholastic offence (the Scholastic Offence Policy can be viewed in the Western Academic Calendar).

Plagiarism Checking:

Students may be required to submit their assignments to turnitin.com on the class WebCT website after they are completed. These papers will be subject to submission for textual originality.

Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness

(https://studentservices.uwo.ca/secure/index.cfm).

Students must see the Academic Counsellor and submit all required documentation in order to be approved for certain accommodation:

(http://counselling.ssc.uwo.ca/procedures/medical_accommodation.html)

Accessibility Options:

Please contact the course instructor if you require material in an alternate format or if you require any other arrangements to make this course more accessible to you. You may also wish to contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at 661-2111 x 82147 for any specific question regarding an accommodation.

(http://www.registrar.uwo.ca/examinations/accommodated_exams.html)

Scholastic offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/) for a complete list of options how to obtain help.