

SOCIOLOGY 160: THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

Spring 2025, UC-San Diego

Prof. Tom Medvetz (Zoom ID: 938 872 8606)

One-on-one discussions: by appointment (<https://tommedvetz.youcanbook.me>) or by appointment

Email: tmedvetz@ucsd.edu (please include the phrase "SOC 160" in the subject line of your email)

Office: 485 SSB

Course readings: [link](#) (also linked from the course Canvas page)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The sociology of culture is a core subfield within the sociology discipline and a key point of juncture between sociology and its neighbors, especially anthropology, history, psychology, philosophy, economics, and political science. The aim of this class is to survey some of the field's major traditions, concepts, and theories. We will begin with a set of readings that provide some intellectual history and address basic conceptual issues. As the quarter progresses, we will run through several overlapping perspectives that have shaped the sociological study of culture. Together the readings will illustrate the enormous range of work carried out under the banner of cultural sociology. At each point, we'll try to draw linkages among the texts and expose their gaps and tensions. My aim is not only to help you learn about the sociology of culture, but also to help you develop your critical reading and thinking skills.

An important note: To do well in this class, you must keep up with the assigned readings. The lectures will proceed from the assumption that you've finished each day's readings in advance.

COURSE FORMAT

Our twofold aim is to understand sociological theories of culture on their own terms and to use the theories to shed light on contemporary examples. Concretely, the upshot is that our focus will move back and forth between academic texts and a series of non-academic (mostly documentary) videos. It's important that you attend to both sides of this equation by keeping up with the readings and watching the assigned videos. You can access all text and video materials, free of charge, through the SOCI 160 Canvas page.

I am available for one-on-one discussions. My office hours this quarter are still to be determined, but you may book appointments with me at <https://tommedvetz.youcanbook.me> or by emailing me at tmedvetz@ucsd.edu. Although it's not required, I would encourage you to take advantage of the chance to meet at some point during the quarter.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Your grade in this class has three parts:

- (1) The first (60 percent total; 15 percent per memo) is based on a series of four analytic memos, due on the Fridays of weeks 3, 5, 7, and 9. Each memo will ask you to relate one of the assigned videos to the theories we've discussed in class. (See the schedule below for all reading and video assignments, memo due dates, etc.)

What does a good analytic memo look like? The key word is *analytic*, meaning it should go beyond a straight recap of the texts/videos in question and speak to the core sociological issues. You may relate the readings and videos to the ideas presented in lecture. You're encouraged to offer your opinions and to agree or disagree with the authors/documentarians (and me). Always be sure to say something non-obvious—and to write clearly! (Also, please sure to indicate plainly which memo assignment you are doing.) Please try to limit your memos to 3-4 pages each. And please don't ask me about spacing, formatting, etc. (For the most part, it doesn't matter.) As I'll repeat below, you may not use outside or secondary sources—nothing from the internet, no published or unpublished writings, no ChatGPT, nothing—only the course readings, documentaries, lecture notes, and your own brilliant minds. Please submit your memos online through the Turnitin module on the course's Canvas page; in other words, please don't email it to me.

(2) The second part of your grade (15 percent) is based on your attendance and class participation. I will sometimes take attendance, and I'll always take note of your participation.

(3) The third and final part of your grade (25 percent) is based on a writing assignment, which will be due at the end of the final exam period for this course. I will make the prompt for this assignment available around the end of week 6.

As noted, all written assignments for this course must be handed in electronically through the Turnitin module on the course's Canvas page, and you may not use outside sources or materials of any kind, including generative AI software like ChatGPT. If there is any indication that you have violated this rule, your assignment will be forwarded to UCSD's Academic Integrity Office. Pretty please, with sugar on top, don't cheat. So, in summary:

Analytic memos (4 @ 15 percent each) =	60 percent
Attendance/participation =	15 percent
Final writing assignment	<u>25 percent</u>
	100

OTHER POLICIES & RESOURCES

Academic integrity

You may not misrepresent your work in any way or be party to another student's failure to maintain academic integrity. I will refer any suspected cases of cheating, including plagiarism and the use of generative AI software, to the Academic Integrity Office. For the UCSD Policy on Integrity of Scholarship, see: <https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/process/policy.html>. The minimum penalty for violations of academic integrity will be an F for the course.

Students with Disabilities

I am committed to creating a course that is inclusive, equitable, and accessible. If you require academic accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office for Students with Disabilities. You are also welcome to discuss your options with me privately.

Classroom conduct

Please refrain from being disruptive to your fellow students and your instructor. Disruptive behavior includes coming to class late, leaving early, text messaging, and not silencing your phone before class.

Writing

The ability to write clearly is very important, and not something that can be reliably distinguished from “good ideas” expressed poorly. In your papers, please pay special attention to grammar, mechanics, syntax, style, and organization. In the past, students have asked me for references on writing advice, and I often point them to these two: the classic *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White and *The St. Martin’s Handbook* (St. Martin’s Press, 6th edition).

Childcare Resources

<https://students.ucsd.edu/well-being/wellness-resources/student-parents/child-care.html>

<https://child.ucsd.edu/resources/options.html>

<https://child.ucsd.edu/resources/ccampis.html>

Student Health and Wellness:

<https://vcsa.ucsd.edu/student-success/student-well-being.html>

(Basic Needs: <https://basicneeds.ucsd.edu>)

CLASS SCHEDULE

The [#s] below correspond to the numbered file names in the course readings folder.

I. Introduction: the cultural turn

Week 1 (Mar 31 – Apr 4)

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|--|------------|
| [1] Lyn Spillman, “Introduction: Culture and Cultural Sociology” | p. 1-15 |
| [2] William H. Sewell, Jr., Logics of History, “The Concept(s) of Culture” | p. 152-174 |
| [3] Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Primitive Classification, “The Problem” | p. 3-9 |

II. Thick description

Week 2 (Apr 7-11)

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|---|------------|
| [4] Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” | p. 3-30 |
| [5] Clifford Geertz, “Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” | p. 412-453 |
| MEMO #1 MOVIE: <i>City of Gold</i> (2015; dir. Laura Gabbert; 91m) –or–
<i>Jiro Dreams of Sushi</i> (2011; dir. David Gelb; 81m) | |

III. Culture as ideological control

Week 3 (Apr 14-18)

- [6] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" p. 130-143
[7] Gideon Kunda, *Engineering Culture* (selections)
 chapter 1 p. 1-25
 chapter 4 p. 92-128
MEMO #2 MOVIE: *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015; dir. Alex Gibney; 119m)

**** MEMO #1 DUE: FRI, APR 18 ****

IV. The production of culture and the market of symbolic goods

Week 4 (Apr 21-25)

- [8] Howard Becker, *Artworlds*, chapter 1 p. 1-39
[9] Clayton Childress, *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel*
 chapter 1 (excerpt) p. 1-8
 chapters 2-3 p. 17-58
 chapter 9 p. 185-204
MEMO #3 MOVIE: *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010; dir. Banksy; 87m)

Week 5 (Apr 28 – May 2)

- [10] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" (excerpt) p. 29-40
[11] John Thompson, *Merchants of Culture* (selections)
 "Introduction" p. 1-25
 "Conclusion" p. 403-409
[12] Thomas Medvetz, "Transcendence, Fast and Slow: *Infinite Jest* and the Dynamics of a Cultural Splash" p. 105-132
[NO MOVIE]

**** MEMO #2 DUE: FRI, MAY 2 ****

V. Cultural capital

Week 6 (May 5-9)

- [13] Mark Grief, "The Hipster in the Mirror" p. 1-3
[14] Andrzej Klimczuk, "Cultural Capital" p. 1-5
[15] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" p. 241-257
[16] Sam Friedman & Aaron Reeves, "From Aristocratic to Ordinary: Shifting Modes of Elite Distinction" p. 323-350
FINAL PAPER MOVIE: *Junebug* (2005; dir. Phil Morrison; 106m)

Week 7 (May 12-16)

- [17] Richard Ocejo, *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*
 Introduction p. 1-21
 chapter 2 p. 50-75
[NO MOVIE]

**** MEMO #3 DUE: FRI, MAY 16 ****

VI. American culture

Week 8 (May 19-23)

[18] Karen A. Cerulo and Janet M. Ruane, *Dreams of a Lifetime: How Who We Are Shapes How We Imagine the Future*

[up to you;
do your best]

[NO MOVIE]

Week 9 (May 26-30)

[19] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*

chapters 1-3

p. 3-84

MEMO #4 MOVIE: *American Factory* (2019; dir. Steven Bognar, Julia Reichert; 110m)

**** MEMO #4 DUE: FRI, MAY 30 ****

Week 10 (Jun 2-6)

[19] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*

chapters 7-8

p. 167-218

chapter 11 + appendix

p. 275-307

[NO MOVIE]