Soc. 440, Fall 2006
Sociology of Knowledge and Ignorance

UMass Boston, Sociology Dept.
Prof. Mohammad Tamdgidi
Fall 2006
Office Hrs: WF 10:30-11:30 and 12:30-1:30 (and by appt.)
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance. —Confucius

Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge. —Kahlil Gibran

Then is what you see through this window onto the world so lovely that you have no desire whatsoever to look out through any other window?—and that you even make an attempt to prevent others from doing so? —Friedrich Nietzsche

This course deals with epistemological sociology, i.e., what, why, and how we come to know, or not, about our personal selves and the broader social world. In other courses we think about many subjects; in this course, the subject matter is our thinking itself, explored within a sociological framework. It focuses on the determinants of the gap between our social realities, both personal and global, on one hand and our knowledge of them on the other. Our central purpose will be to develop our critical and especially self-critical thinking skills—to be able to consciously problematize what we take for granted as the “knowledges” and “truths” of our everyday lives and the world, and inquire whether and how we can liberate ourselves from structurally embedded false knowledges about ourselves and the world that limit our creativity and growth as human beings. To this end, using a variety of sociological, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural readings augmented by selected films, we will explore whether our social and sociological methods and theories have served, or can serve, as a guide to liberatory human practice in both self-reflective and world-historical contexts. Student assignments will consist of engaged attendance and participation in discussions, shared reports and presentations, and a research paper cultivating students’ critical sociological imaginations by exploring the link between their personal troubles and global public issues.

We will study the subject by proceeding from micro- to increasingly macrosociological perspectives. Our inquiries into the link between our personal troubles and broader social issues—the central concern of the sociological imagination—will be pursued throughout the course through a 15-page autobiographical paper developed along two drafts. The key purpose of the paper is to apply the perspectives and concepts learned in class in the context of our global self-research. To achieve this end, we will pursue three lines of inquiry throughout the course: 1-class readings, presentations, lectures, and discussions will provide us with collective experiences and conceptual tools and methods necessary for our individual/collective self-studies; 2-an autobiographical research paper will focus our attention and explorations on a still unresolved significant question, issue, trouble, or problem we personally face in our everyday lives today, faced in the past, or may face in the future; 3-the films incorporated into the course will provide us with a common audiovisual medium in popular culture through which we can experientially share our reflections on ourselves and the world alongside class and outside readings. In addition to the sociological self-research paper, grading will be based on class attendance, class discussion participation, a written and oral reading report, and self-critical thinking.
COURSE ORGANIZATION:

The course is organized in a “research working group” format where “teacher-student” and “student-teachers” explore with one another common subject matters (see Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed on this teaching style). While the instructor will introduce and guide class readings and discussions, students are required to raise in-depth and substantive questions about readings in class as discussants, sharing their insights and critical comments with one another. The students’ work will be evaluated on the basis of the following:

1. **Attendance (25%)**: Attendance is a foundational requirement in this class, because literally everything else is derived from the few hours we spend together every week. Therefore it constitutes an important part of student grading. **Attendance grade points will not be given for absences; however, absences may be made up by writing a reading/review report on the subject matter of the missed class session.** Although attendance will be taken in class, it is also the student’s responsibility to send an email to the instructor for each session missed, including date of absence, for record keeping purposes and to indicate whether you intend to make-up for the absence. Points will be taken off the student’s total grade for each unmade-up absent session (for once-per-week classes 3% per session, for twice-per-week classes 1.5% per session, and for thrice-per-week classes, 1% per session). Students can make-up for their absences by writing a 2, 3, or 4 page long (depending on times class meets per week) critical commentary on the readings/films/subject matter of the session they missed (format may follow the regular presentation report assignment below).

2. **Class Discussion Participation (5%)**: Participation can range from active listening to raising questions and engaging in discussion. Please note that attendance is not simply physical presence. It means being attentive. This requires having read the material assigned for the session, being prepared with pertinent questions or comments to raise in class, coming on time to class, being engaged during class, and not leaving the room during the class before it is over. Taking excessive personal breaks during the class not only affects your attendance and participation record, but can be disruptive to class and other students’ learning; please try to avoid it unless absolutely necessary. For similar reasons, your cell phones must be turned off during class time and as far as possible please avoid having sound-generating food in class.

3. **Self-Critical Thinking (5%)**: Students are expected to view everything, every text, and every viewpoint, especially their own predispositions, perspectives, and biases with a (self) critical eye. You are in this class to learn beyond what you already know, not simply to prove what you already know. This necessarily means being open to question your own existing views in order to critically enrich and move beyond them with new insights. You will not be graded on whether you agree or disagree with a certain viewpoint. You will be graded on whether you substantively engage with and demonstrate an understanding of the views you agree or disagree with, and self-critically develop your own viewpoints in a well-rounded, researched, and coherent way. I will assess this in various ways throughout the semester—via your papers, comments in class, etc.” I keep the grading for self-critical thinking separate from your written assignments, not because it is separate from them, but because I like to see you develop this skill and attitude across various course activities.

4. **Written Reading Report and Oral Presentation (15%)**: At the beginning of the semester, students will be randomly assigned discussant numbers corresponding to the numbers assigned to readings (preceding each reading item on the schedule below; this will be explained in class). For each assigned reading prepare a written report to be handed in the SAME class in which it is to be orally presented and discussed. Students are welcome to choose to revise their already prepared report based on the class discussion, in which case the report will be again due a week from the original due date. The report should be 5 pages (Times font, size 12, double-spaced) comprised of the following (note the breakdown of assigned grade points):

   a)-**Written Summary (3 points)**. The summary must be in your own words. Rules against plagiarism will apply to reading reports as well. If you have to quote, you must provide proper citation. You must identify at the beginning of the report which part of the textbook you are reporting on. Make sure you provide your name and date/topic of report at the beginning.
**b)-Written Concepts (3 points)**. Identify, list, and define (using direct quotes from the reading, including page citation) on a stand-alone page at least 10 concepts related to the theories or perspectives discussed in readings being presented, concepts which you may find particularly useful to your own and perhaps others’ term paper research. Make copies of this page and distribute it to others in class. This will be a useful/collective effort to “harvest” important and useful concepts from readings and share them with other students.

**c)-Written Linkages (3 points)**. Critically reflecting on the concepts learned from the reading and the value or shortcomings of the author’s viewpoint, try linking the concepts/reading to the other readings of that session, of that week, and previous sessions when applicable. Other useful linkages can be to your own life and self-explorations, and to previous class discussions/films if applicable. **If you make no efforts in critically linking your assigned text to other readings of especially that session/week (and previous ones), and/or to other issues as explained above, you will not gain linkage points.**

**d)-Written Questions (1 point)**. A set of three clearly formulated and relevant questions (listed separately at the end of report) arising from the reading in connection to other readings of class, its personal relevance to you, or in relationship to previous readings/discussions/films in class. Ask creative, mature, and thoughtful linkage questions that merit discussion in class.

**e)-Oral Discussion (5 points)**. The instructor will introduce the session readings in class, so discussants need not present a detailed summary of readings as part of their oral presentations (especially given all students must have read the session readings). The purpose of oral discussion is to help generate discussion in class following instructor’s introductory remarks by drawing upon concepts, linkages, and questions as included in the discussant’s report. **Suggested format:** We assume all students have read the reading, so go directly to defining and linking/applying (some) of the concepts/ideas learned from the reading and how they can be useful for your/others’ sociological self-explorations; then end your presentation with sharing your questions about the readings. Discussants must maintain an active part in the session in generating and guiding class discussion, helping to make the discussion lively, informed, and interesting. The oral presentation will be evaluated based on the clarity of communication (2 points) and degree to which it generates class engagement and discussion (3 points). Each oral presentation SHOULD TAKE NO MORE THAN 5 MINUTES. [NOTE: depending on enrollment, there may be extra discussant reports assigned to volunteering students, in which case an extra 3-pg written/oral report may be presented for up to 2% extra make-up grading value].

**5. Sociological Self-Research Paper:** This is the heart of your work in the course, devoted to the serious sociological exploration, within a micro/macro framework, of an important issue in your life in conjunction with class/outside readings and films. A Term Paper Guideline will be handed in to you separately in class with the syllabus. This assignment consists of a 15 page sociological self-research paper addressing the topic “**Using various concepts and perspectives studied through class/outside readings, discussions, and films, how do they jointly help me understand in a global context an important, still unresolved issue I face today, have faced in the past, and/or will face in the future, its nature, root causes, and consequences, and how I can move towards its effective resolution?**” The sociological self-research paper will be progressively developed throughout the course along a 7-page first draft and a 15-page final draft. They must be typed, double-spaced, in Times font, size 12; relevant charts/tables are encouraged but will not be counted towards paper length requirement. The paper length requirement does not include any title pages or reference/bibliographies. For the due dates of the first and final drafts, see the weekly schedule further below.

**A-Paper Topic Ideas (5%):** 2 full-pages. Early in the semester you will be asked to think about 2-3 topic ideas about what you would like to explore in-depth in your research paper. Read the research paper guidelines handed to you in class to begin working on your topic and paper. You do not need to read anything to choose your topic. The topic can be chosen from the fabric of your own everyday life and how you relate to and experience the world. The sooner you begin thinking about your topic the better since the class readings and films will become more meaningful when you have a pertinent personal topic in mind. Try to come up with 2-3 actual possible paper TITLES that best express the issue to be explored. **Note:** student papers are treated confidentially and not circulated or discussed in class (unless volunteered), so you should feel comfortable choosing and exploring your own personal topics.
B-The First Draft (15%): 7-pages. The First Draft involves exploring the problem or issue based on your present knowledge, views, and attitudes towards the subject. The first draft is mostly self-reflective and microsociological in nature, but should begin to involve concerns and curiosities about larger national and global forces at work in your life. You must also, at the end, include a bibliography of what readings in class or outside may be of relevance to your further self-exploration in the final draft. Although this paper is basically self-reflective, it must be serious, analytical, and as engaging as possible regarding all relevant facts or ideas pertaining to your inquiry.

The breakdown of percentage points for the first draft are roughly as follows:

- **4%**: Micro exploration of the research problem/question
- **5%**: Use of at least 20 concepts from readings from the first half of class preceding the paper deadline (0.25 each concept) (**bold** each concept used in text) [use of each concept must be thoughtful and detailed enough to convey your practical understanding of its meaning in context]. Don’t **bold** generic or common words as concepts; the concepts must be clearly derived from the theories and perspectives learned in class.
- **3%**: 1 quoted linkage each to three articles in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (Journal articles available on WebCT with hard copies also put on reserve, sample issues will be shown in class)
- **2%**: 1 point for each linkage to the films viewed during the first half of class preceding the paper deadline.
- **1%** A bibliography of prospective outside **scholarly** readings specifically related to your topic, readings which you will consult and read in preparation of your final draft in the next stage.

C-The Final Draft (30%): 15-pages (including reworked pages of the first draft). The concern with macro dimension of your inquiry, i.e., the relation of your selves and broader social forces must now become the central subject of your investigations. The final draft is to link together in a purposeful and meaningful way your critical self-reflections begun in the first draft, with class/outside readings and films shown in class. The evaluation and grading of the final term paper will be roughly divided in terms of how students bring the three essential required elements of the term paper together (self-explorations, broader social dimension as learned through required class readings, and ALL films shown in class). Other outside sources with specific relevance to each student’s particular topic/issue/problem must also be critically incorporated into the class readings.

The breakdown of percentage points for the final draft (15 pages, including reworked pages of the first draft) are roughly as follows:

- **8%**: Macro exploration of research problem/question (4 points) and its linkage (4%) to the micro exploration
- **5%**: Use of at least 20 ADDITIONAL concepts from readings for the second half of class (0.25 each concept) (**bolditalic** each of these new concept used in text) (continue the concept usages from the first draft and keep them marked in **bold** only) [use of each concept must be thoughtful and detailed enough to convey your practical understanding of its meaning in context]. Don’t **bolditalic** generic words as concepts; the concepts must be clearly derived from the theories and perspectives learned in class.
- **6%**: 6 quoted linkages to issues or arguments advanced in the required textbook/readings by Elizabeth Minnich and Gurdjieff used in class (1 point each linkage)
- **3%**: 3 quoted linkage to the required reading by Louise DeSalvo (*Writing as a Way of Healing*)
- **3%**: 3 quoted linkages to at least two outside scholarly readings (journal articles, book chapters) that directly pertain to your topic (1 point each linkage). These may include relevant readings you are doing, or have done, in your other classes, but they have to be directly pertaining to the topic of your paper.
- **3%**: ADDITIONAL linkages to the other films viewed in second half of class [keep and
• 2%: Based on your critical sociological self-explorations in the paper, in the conclusion of the paper list and elaborate on specific and concrete steps you can take to bring about important change in your life towards resolving the issues and problems you explored in the paper.

**Office Hours:** Experience has shown that those students who regularly consult during office hours with the instructor regarding their progress in the course and their papers do better than those who don’t. Each student is encouraged to meet with the instructor during office hours to discuss the topic and progress of her/his research paper. The meetings should indicate serious and active engagement by students with their papers, readings, and discussions of the course.

**Student Conduct.** Students are required to adhere to university policies on academic honesty and student conduct. The current Code of Student Conduct, including information about academic dishonesty and plagiarism is available online at: [http://www.umb.edu/academics/undergraduate/office/students/CodeofStudentConduct.html](http://www.umb.edu/academics/undergraduate/office/students/CodeofStudentConduct.html).

**Accommodations.** Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 offers guidelines for curriculum modifications and adaptations for students with documented disabilities. If applicable, students may obtain adaptation recommendations from the Ross Center for Disability Services, CC 2-2100, (617-287-7430). If this applies to you, you must present these recommendations to each professor within a reasonable period, preferably by the end of the Add/Drop period.

**Student Referral Program:** If it appears to the instructor that you might not pass this course, and if the instructor cannot figure out how to support your success in the course, the instructor might inform the director of the Student Referral Program (CC-1100; 287-5500). The staff in this program will attempt to help you address the difficulties that are interfering with your success in the class. If you do not want your instructor to let the Student Referral Program know that you are having difficulty, please let your instructor know.

**Grading Policy:** The grading system used in this course is based on the accumulation of percentage points you receive for each requirement/assignment of the course. In other words, for each graded requirement/assignment, instead of receiving a letter grade (A, B, C, etc.) you will receive a percentage point grade up to the total assigned for that part of the course expectations. The only letter grade you will receive will be your final course grade submitted at the end of the semester, per grade curve system listed below. To see where your course grade stands at any time, add what percentage points you’ve received so far, and assume you will do perfectly for the rest; then look up the total below. Note that you can miss a few sessions and still receive an A, without doing a makeup for the session (93 out of 100 still brings A); however, by not making up absences, you increase the risks of other grading shortfalls affecting your course grade. So try to makeup for absences, as much as you can.

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<th>Percentage Points</th>
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<td>59 or less</td>
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**Revision Options:** Please note that in this course, the grades you receive prior to the final paper can be improved with additional make-up work. You never lose a chance to do the best you can until the course is over. If you miss any points in your syllabus reaction paper, written presentation report, and on your topic ideas essay and first 7-page draft of the paper, you have an opportunity to revise and resubmit based on the instructor’s feedback and commentaries given, within a duration of two weeks past the receipt of grade for the assignment. Depending on the quality of the revisions made, the grade will be adjusted to reflect the extra work done to improve the report/paper. At the end of the course, for students who have made additional efforts and progress in their final papers (beyond prior assignments or revisions) throughout the course additional percentage points may be added to their accumulated total before calculating their final grades. When submitting revised texts, you will need to submit the originally graded text (with my notes on it) with your revised version so that I can compare new work you have done on the text in order to
give you proper credit for your additional work.

**Required Readings:** (*in book store, † on reserve/WebCT*)

- Kathleen Riordan Speeth. *The Gurdjieff Work*. 0874774926,

Copies of articles handed out in class:

- Tamdgidi, M.H., “Toward A Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressive Selves: Paulo Freire and G. I. Gurdjieff in Comparative Perspective” (Copy previously handed out in class)

†Various articles in seven issues of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge, Vol. I, No. 1 & 2; and Vol. II, No. 1&2. Vol. III double-issue, No. 1&2.; Vol. V, No. 1&2 and Special Issue. [Two sets of each issue are on reserve; additionally the articles can be individually downloaded from the course’s WebCT page, to be explained in class].

**Recommended Readings:**


Gurdjieff: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas, by John Shirley, ISBN: 1585422878


Immanuel Wallerstein. *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century*. 1565844572


COURSE SCHEDULE:

**Important Note 1:** All students (including each presenter) must read all the readings assigned for each session. Presenters basically go further in reading their particular assigned reading more in-depth while preparing their written reports and oral presentations.

**Important Note 2:** The reading by DeSalvo (*Writing As a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*) is a required reading, but not assigned to a particular session. Students are expected to read on their own half of the book in the first half and the other in the second half of the semester, as they progress in working on their term presentations.

**WEEK ONE: Openings**
Wednesday, September 6: First Day of Class.
   Course Objective, Organization, Schedule. Assignments of Readings/Introductory questionnaire.
Friday, September 8: Film: THE GIRL IN THE CAFE.

**WEEK TWO: The Sociological Imagination, and Previous Student Papers Symposium**
Monday, September 11: Film. Continued. Discussion.
   [Note: September 12 is add/drop deadline]
Wednesday, September 13: The Sociological Imagination.
   Readings:
   Read the short piece by C. Wright Mills, “The Sociological Imagination,” attached to your syllabus
Friday, September 15: Previous Student Papers Symposium.
   Readings:
   • Each student should carefully read one student article to be recommended from the table of contents of the issues of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, trying to see how the student used his or her “sociological imagination” and various concepts learned in class in exploring his or her topic (table of contents and copies are available via WebCT site of the course--details to be explained in class; two copies of each issue is also available on reserve).

**WEEK THREE: Introductory Epistemological Frameworks**
Monday, September 18: The Big Word “Epistemology”
   Readings:
   Esther Kingston-Mann, “Teaching, Learning, Diversity: Just Don’t Call it Epistemology!” (copy previously handed out in class)
Wednesday, September 20: Sociology of Knowledge and Bias
   Readings:
Friday, September 22: Liberating Social Theory
   Readings:
   Tamdgidi, M.H., “ Toward A Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressive Selves: Paulo Freire and G. I. Gurdjieff in Comparative Perspective” (copy previously handed out in class)

**WEEK FOUR: Self-Knowledge and Ignorance**
Monday, September 25: Gurdjieff’s Life and the Essay “Glimpses of Truth”
   Readings:
   Wednesday, September 27: The Philosophical Basis of Gurdjieff’s System
   Readings:
   Friday, September 29: The Psychology of Ordinary Human Beings
   Readings:

**Assignment Due in Class:** Friday, Sept 29--> 2-page paper topic ideas
WEEK FIVE: Self-Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, October 2: Human Possibilities
Readings:
Wednesday, October 4: The Gurdjieff Work
Readings:
Friday, October 6: The Living Tradition?
Readings:

WEEK SIX: Self-Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, October 9: Holiday (Columbus Day)
Wednesday, October 11: Gurdjieff Views (continued)
Readings:
Friday, October 13: Gurdjieff Views (continued)
Readings:

WEEK SEVEN: Film
Monday, October 16: MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES
Wednesday, October 18: Film continued.
Friday, October 20: Film: Discussion.

WEEK EIGHT: Global Knowledge and Ignorance
Monday, October 23: Overview of Minnich’s book

**∆ ASSIGNMENT DUE IN CLASS: October 23 ---> 7-PAGE FIRST PAPER DRAFTS DUE**
Readings: Preface (pp. xi-xx)
Wednesday, October 25: Thinking
Readings:
9. Minnich, “Thinking: An Introductory Essay” (pp. 1-24)
Friday, October 27: Transforming Knowledge
Readings:
10. Minnich, “Still Transforming Knowledge: Circling Out, Pressing Deeper” (pp. 25-47)

WEEK NINE: Global Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, October 30: Beginnings
Readings:
11. Minnich, “No One Beginning” (pp. 48-61)
Wednesday, November 1: Contextual Approaches
Readings:
12. Minnich, “Contextual Approaches: Thinking About” (pp. 62-86)
Friday, November 3: Conceptual Approaches
Readings:
13. Minnich, “Conceptual Approaches: Thinking Through” (pp. 87-102)

WEEK TEN: Film
Monday, November 6: Film: The Peace DVD
Wednesday, November 8: Film continued.

*[Note: November 9 is Pass/Fail and Withdraw deadline]*
Friday, November 10: Film continued. Discussion.

WEEK ELEVEN: Global Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, November 13: Errors Basic to Dominant Traditions
Readings:
14. Minnich, “Faulty Generalizations and Hierarchically Invidious Monism” first part (pp. 104-128)
Wednesday, November 15: Errors Basic to Dominant Traditions
Readings:
15. Minnich, “Faulty Generalizations and Hierarchically Invidious Monism” second part (pp. 128-153)
Friday, November 17: Circular Reasoning
16. Minnich, “Circular Reasoning” (pp. 154-168)
WEEK TWELVE: Global Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, November 20: Mystified Concepts
   Readings:
   17. Minnich, “Mystified Concepts” first part (pp. 169-198)
Wednesday, November 22: Mystified Concepts
   Readings:
   18. Minnich, “Mystified Concepts” second part (pp. 198-231)
Friday, November 24: Holiday.

WEEK THIRTEEN: Global Knowledge and Ignorance (continued)
Monday, November 27: Partial Knowledge
   Readings:
   19. Minnich, “Partial Knowledge ...” (pp. 232-264)
Wednesday, November 29:
   Readings: Conclusions
   20. Minnich, “Circling Back, Keeping Going” (pp. 265-276)
Friday, December 1: Discussion

WEEK FOURTEEN: Film
Monday, December 4: Film. TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE
Wednesday, December 6: Film continued. Discussion.
Friday, December 8: Discussion.

WEEK FIFTEEN: Conclusions
Monday, December 11: General Review and Discussion.
Wednesday, December 13: Student evaluations of the course.

DUE IN CLASS: Wednesday, December 13 --------> 15-PAGE FINAL PAPERS DUE
C. Wright Mills on the Sociological Imagination

From The Sociological Imagination

The Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills (1959)

The sociological imagination involves the perspective of modern society is so large and within

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C. Wright Mills (1959)
The Social Interrogation

will come to play a greater role in human affairs. This is not just a question of understanding the nature of the social fabric, but also of recognizing the role of human sensibilities—both in the immediate effects of policy and in the long-term outcomes of cultural and political developments. In this respect, the social interrogator has a unique role to play in helping to understand the complex interplay between the individual and the collective, and how it shapes our lives. The social interrogator must be able to analyze the underlying causes of social phenomena and to provide insights that can help us to better understand the world around us.