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**Joel Best** is a Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice. His research concerns social problems and American culture; his books include Damned Lies and Statistics, More Damned Lies and Statistics, and Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads. His MALS class is related to two current two book-length projects--a study of contemporary self-congratulatory culture, and an analysis of social problems that seem to threaten the middle class.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

#### **MALS 667: American Dreams, American Nightmares**

This seminar will adopt a sociological perspective to examine a set of contemporary social issues. Very often, discussions of social problems focus on the conditions confronting America's poor. This course will shift the focus to the middle class—a group that receives surprisingly little sociological attention, even though most Americans consider themselves middle class.

The course will be divided into two parts. The first part will accentuate the positive by considering the nature of the American Dream, and its expression in self-congratulatory culture. The second part will consider a set of claims about threats to the middle class and the American Dream, what we might call American Nightmares. That is, we hear that our schools are failing, that the family is collapsing, and so on. Our goal will be to both consider the nature of these claims, and to assess the evidence related to them.

In general, we will have two sorts of readings. First, there will be a general assignment for each week: this will be a modest amount of material that I will ask each of you to examine, including both popular and academic discussions of the week's issue, and in some cases relevant government statistics. I have tried to select readings that are available electronically. In addition, I have identified one or two recent books related to each week's topic, and individuals will be asked to read two of these during the course of the semester, and come to that on that topic both with a brief written book review (no more than three pages), and prepared to discuss what the book has to say.

Finally, I am going to ask that each of you prepare an independent analysis of some topic related to the larger class (you might choose one of the topics we've selected, or something that I've overlooked). I will expect you to present your findings orally before the group during one of our final sessions, and to turn in a paper on your topic.

Grades will be based on overall class participation (10%), the first book review (10%), the second book review (20%), and the final paper/presentation (40%).

#### Locating the Readings

Almost all of the required readings that are available on the Web or through the library's electronic resources (I have given **bold-faced** suggestions for locating each source). There are a couple ways to get at the library's electronic holdings:

- I. Go to the library's web page, and click on "Electronic Journals." Locate the name of the journal in the alphabetical list, click on the link, etc.
- II. Alternatively, go to the library's web page, and click on "Databases." (The reading assignments identify databases [e.g., **JSTOR**] that can be used to locate particular articles.) Find the database in the alphabetical list, click on the link, etc.

#### Outline:

##### Feb. 12: What Is the American Dream?

No assignment, although feel free to consider the idea of the American Dream, who says it is threatened—and why.

##### Feb. 19: Background: The Social Problems Process

#### Required reading:

Herbert Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," Social Problems 18 (1971): 298-306. **[JSTOR]**

Peter Conrad & Deborah Potter, "From Hyperactive Children to ADHD Adults: Observations on the Expansion of Medical Categories," Social Problems 47 (2000): 559-82. **[JSTOR]**

Joel Best, "Monster Hype," Education Next 2 (Summer, 2002): 51-55. **[available at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/3366586.html>]**

Relevant books:

Philip Jenkins, The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice (New York: Oxford, 2003). (or one of his other books—Intimate Enemies, Using Murder, Moral Panic, Mystics and Messiahs, Images of Terror, Hidden Gospels)

Valerie Jenness & and Ryken Grattet, Making Hate a Crime: From Social Movement to Law Enforcement (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

*Feb. 26: Prize Proliferation—Is There More Excellence?*

Required reading:

Joel Best, “Prize Proliferation,” Sociological Forum 23 (2008): [I will arrange for access to this paper]

John Street, “‘Showbusiness of a Serious Kind’: A Cultural Politics of the Arts Prize,” Media, Culture and Society 27 (2005): 819-40. [download via Electronic Journals]

Relevant books:

James F. English, The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

John P. Hewitt, The Myth of Self-Esteem: Finding Happiness and Solving Problems in America (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998).

*Mar. 4: Heroes—Who Do We Admire?*

Required reading:

Orrin E. Klapp, “The Creation of Popular Heroes,” American Journal of Sociology 54 (1948): 135-41. [JSTOR]

Howard Schuman, et al., Elite Revisionists and Popular Beliefs: Christopher Columbus, Hero or Villain?,” Public Opinion Quarterly 69 (2005): 2-29. [download via Electronic Journals]

Fran McInerney, “Heroic Frames: Discursive Constructions Around the Requested Death Movement in Australia in the Late-1990s,” Social Science and Medicine 62 (2006): 654-67. [download via Electronic Journals]

Relevant books:

Gary Alan Fine, Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Joshua Gamson, Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

*Mar. 11: Rankings—How Do We Stack Up?*

Required reading:

Michael Sauder & Ryon Lancaster, "Do Rankings Matter? The Effects of U.S. News & World Report Rankings on the Admissions Process of Law Schools," Law and Society Review 40 (2006): 105-34—you can skip over the fancy statistical analysis (pp. 119-29). [**download via Electronic Journals**]

Jay Mathews, "The 100 Best High Schools in America," Newsweek (June 2, 2003): 48-. [**OneFile**]

Matthew Quirk, "The Best Class Money Can Buy," Atlantic (November, 2005): 128-33. [**OneFile**]

Relevant books:

Grant Blank, Critics, Ratings, and Society (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

Mar. 18: Stupidity—Are We Getting Dumber?

Gerald W. Bracey, "The First Time Everything Changed," Phi Delta Kappan 89 (Oct. 2007): 119-. [**Academic OneFile**]

Diane Ravitch, "Our School Problem and Its Solutions," City Journal (Winter, 1999). [**available at: [http://www.city-journal.org/html/9\\_1\\_our\\_school\\_prob.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_1_our_school_prob.html)**]

Lawrence Mishel and Rochard Rothstein, "Schools as Scapegoats," American Prospect (October 12, 2007). [**available at: [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=schools\\_as\\_scapegoats](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=schools_as_scapegoats)**]

Relevant books:

E.D. Hirsch, The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

Steven Johnson, Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter (Riverhead, 2006).

Mar. 25: Families—Is the Family Threatened?

Kay S. Hymowitz, "Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age," Heritage Foundation Lecture #1005 (March 23, 2007). [**available at: <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/hl1005.cfm>**]

David Popenoe, "The Future of Marriage in America," in The State of Our Unions, 2007 (National Marriage Project). (The whole report is worth looking at.) [**available at: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2007.htm>**]

Kathleen A. Bogle, "The Shift from Dating to Hooking Up in College," Sociology Compass 1 (2007): 775-88. [**available at: <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00031.x>**]

Background data:

“Map of the Family” graphs at Heritage Foundation: **[available at: <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/Mapofthefamilycharts.cfm>]**

Relevant books:

Frank Furedi, Paranoid Parenting: Abandon Your Anxieties and Be a Good Parent (New York: Penguin, 2001).

Stephanie Coontz, The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families (New York: Basic, 1997).

Apr. 1: Inequality–Is the Middle Class Shrinking?

Required reading:

Stephen J. Rose, Social Stratification in the United States, revised 2007

Background data:

U.S. Census Bureau, “Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Movements in the U.S. Income Distribution, 1996-1999,” Current Population Reports, Series P70-95, July 2004. (On web–Google title, check out Figure 1 on p.3.)

Relevant books:

Robert H. Frank, Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class (University of California Press, 2007).

Apr. 8: Credit–Is the Economy Going to Collapse?

John Bellamy Foster, “The Household Debt Bubble,” Monthly Review 58 (May, 2006): 1-11. **[available at: <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0506jbf.htm>]** Note: if you print this, you need to click on the links to the four tables and one chart, and then print them separately.

John H. Macklin, “Should Americans Save More?,” American Enterprise Institute Economic Outlook (2005). **[available at:**

**[http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.22024,filter.all/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.22024,filter.all/pub_detail.asp)]**

Relevant books:

Anya Kamenetz, Generation Debt: How Our Future Was Sold Out for Student Loans, Credit Cards, Bad Jobs, No Benefits, and Tax Cuts for Rich Geezers—and How to Fight Back (Riverhead, 2007).

Juliet B. Schor, The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need (New York: Harper, 1998).

*Apr. 15: Risks—Is the World Getting More Dangerous?*

Required reading:

Kathleen J. Tierney, "Toward a Critical Sociology of Risk," Sociological Forum 14 (1999): 215-42. [JSTOR]

Joel Best, "Social Progress and Social Problems: Toward a Sociology of Gloom," Sociological Quarterly 42 (2001): 1-12. [JSTOR]

Michael Fumento is a lawyer/journalist who has written numerous articles (usually for conservative magazines) on all manner of threats (e.g., avian flu, vaccines, secondhand smoke, etc., etc.). All his articles are archived at [www.fumento.com](http://www.fumento.com). Visit his web-site, look around, and read one or two articles on risks that interest you.

Relevant books:

Frank Furedi, Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation (various publishers: first edition, 1998, second edition 2006—either is okay)

Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1992)

*Apr. 22: Health Care—Is the System Failing?*

Malcolm Gladwell. "The Moral Hazard Myth," New Yorker (August 29, 2005). [archived at [www.gladwell.com](http://www.gladwell.com)]

Paul Krugman & Robin Wells, "The Health Care Crisis and What to Do about It," New York Review of Books (March 23, 2006). [available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18802>]

N. Gregory Mankiw, "Beyond Those Health Care Numbers," AEI On the Issues (November 20, 2007). [available at: [http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.27131,filter.all/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.27131,filter.all/pub_detail.asp)]

Relevant books:

John F. Cogan, et al., Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise: Five Steps to a Better Health Care System (AEI Press, 2005).

Jill Quadagno, One Nation Uninsured: Why the U.S. Has No National Health Insurance (Oxford University Press, 2005).

*Apr. 29: Social Security—Will the System Collapse?*

James L. True, "Attention, Inertia, and Equity in the Social Security Program," Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 9 (1999): 571-96—rather technical, but look for the basic model and also try to get some sense of how it applies to Social Security's history. [JSTOR]

David C. John, "2007 Social Security Trustees Report Shows the Urgency of Reform," Heritage Foundation WebMemo #1429 (April 24, 2007). [available at:

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/SocialSecurity/wm1429.cfm>]

Thomas N. Bethell, "How We Can Do It: Cutting the Gap," AARP Bulletin (May, 2007).

[available at: <http://www.aarp.org/bulletin/socialsec/sseightways.html>]

Relevant books:

Peter G. Peterson, Gray Dawn: How the Coming Age Wave Will Transform America—and the World (2000).

Michael A. Hiltzik, The Plot Against Social Security: How the Bush Plan Is Endangering Our Financial Future (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

May 6: Globalization—Does the Wider World Pose a Threat?

Required reading:

Mauro F. Guillen, "Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble? A Critique of Five Key Debates in the Social Science Literature," Annual Review of Sociology 27 (2001): 235-60.

George Ritzer, "Rethinking Globalization: Glocalization/Grobalization and Something/Nothing," Sociological Theory 21 (2003): 193-209. [download via **Electronic Journals**]

Relevant books:

Thomas L. Friedman, The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century, expanded edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2006).

Jagdish Bhagwati, In Defense of Globalization, expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

May 13: Presentations

May 20: Presentations