

# **MALS 626-410 – What, We Worry? Reflections on the Past and the Future**

**Spring, 2010 – Joel Best**

## **SYLLABUS**

### Instructor

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### Course Description

This seminar will adopt a sociological perspective to examine a set of contemporary social issues. It has always seemed to me that Americans worry a great deal, and that these worries incorporate both a nostalgia for the past (“Things has gotten worse!”), and a dread regarding the future (“Things are going to get even worse!”). I want to examine some examples of these worries.

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 class both with a brief written book review (no more than three pages), and prepared to discuss what the book has to say. Ideally, both the review and the comments should present a brief overview of the book’s contents, followed by your critical reaction (how does this book fit within our larger course, etc.).

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. 8: What Do We Worry About—and Why?

No assignment, although feel free to consider the question and how you might answer it.

#### Feb. 15: Background: A Culture of Fear?

##### Required reading:

Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," Harper's (November, 1964): 77-86. [available at: [http://karws.gso.uri.edu/JFK/conspiracy\\_theory/the\\_paranoid\\_mentality/The\\_paranoid\\_style.html](http://karws.gso.uri.edu/JFK/conspiracy_theory/the_paranoid_mentality/The_paranoid_style.html)]

B. Glassner, "Narrative Techniques of Fear Mongering," Social Research 71 (Winter, 2004): 819-26. [Business Source Premier]

Carl Stempel, et al., "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories," Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly (2007): 84 (2007): 819-26. 353-72. [ABI/INFORM]

##### Relevant books:

Frank Furedi, Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation (any edition)

Barry Glassner, The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things (either edition)

#### Feb. 22: Moral Panics

##### Required reading:

Michael Welch, et al., "Moral Panic over Youth Violence: Wolding and the Manufacture

of Menace in the Media," Youth and Society 34 (2002): 3-30. **[Highwire]**  
Grazyna Zajdow, "Moral Panics: The Old and the New," Deviant Behavior 29 (2008):  
640-64. **[Informaworld]**  
Philip Jenkins, "Failure to Launch: Why So Some Social Issues Fail to Detonate Moral  
Panics," British Journal of Criminology 49 (2009): 35-47. **[Highwire]**

Relevant books:

Stanley Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics (any edition)  
David Hajdu, The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed  
America. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Mar. 1: When Did We Lose the American Dream?

Required reading:

Nancey Green Leigh, "What Happened to the American Dream?," California History 868  
(1989): 240-47. **[JSTOR]**  
Carl Elliott, "Pursued by Happiness and Beaten Senseless: Prozac and the American  
Dream," Hastings Center Report 30 (March, 2000): 7-12. **[JSTOR]**  
Brian Starks, "The New Economy and the American Dream," Sociological Quarterly 44  
(2003): 205-25. **[JSTOR]**

Relevant books:

Jim Cullen, The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.  
Freedom of Choice! DELCAT lists more than 300 books with titles that include the term  
"American Dream"—pick one that seems promising

Mar. 8: Stupidity—Are We Getting Dumber?

Required reading:

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 Richard 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:

Mark Bauerlein, The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupifies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future. New York: Penguin, 2008.  
Steven Johnson, Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter (Riverhead, 2006).

Mar. 15: Waves—Recurring American Nightmares

Lincoln Steffens, "I Make a Crime Wave," chapter 14 (pp. 285-91) in The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931. **[available at Google Books—just google the chapter title, and it should pop right up]**

TBA

Relevant books:

(Limited) Freedom of Choice! Philip Jenkins has written three books that are especially relevant: Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America (1998), Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History (2000), and Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way (2001)—pick one.  
James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Mar. 22: Deadlines—Y2K, 2012, Etc.

Required reading:

Kevin F. Quigley, "Bug Reactions: Considering US Government and UK Government Y2K Operations in Light of Media Coverage and Public Opinion Polls," Health, Risk & Society 7 (2005): 267-91. **[CINAHL Plus]**  
Joseph F. Zygmunt, "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses." American Journal of Sociology 75 (1970): 926-48. **[JSTOR]**

Relevant books:

Lawrence E. Joseph, Apocalypse 2012: An Optimist Investigate the End of Civilization. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.  
Diana G. Tumminia, When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Apr. 5: 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]**

Relevant books:

Daniel Gardner, The Science of Fear: How the Culture of Fear Manipulates Your Brain. New York: Dutton, 2008.

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

Apr. 13: Vaccines

Required reading:

Matthew Normand & Jesse Dallery, "Mercury Rising: Exposing the Vaccine-Autism Myth," Skeptic 13 (Fall, 2007): 32-36. **[OneFile]**

Perez, TBA

Rachel Elizabeth Casiday, "Children's Health and the Social Theory of Risk: Insights from the British Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) Controversy," Social Science and Medicine 65 (2007): 1059-70. **[ScienceDirect]**

Relevant books:

David M. Oshinsky, Polio: An American Story. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Jacob Heller, The Vaccine Narrative. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008.

Apr. 20: Flu

Required reading:

Michael Fumento, "Fuss and Feathers: Pandemic Panic over the Avian Flu," Weekly Standard (November 21, 2005). **[available at [www.fumento.com](http://www.fumento.com)]-also look over some of his more recent pieces on swine flu]**

Tsung-Jen Shih, et al., "Media Coverage of Public Health Epidemics: Linking Framing and Issue Attention Cycle Toward an Integrated Theory of Print News Coverage

of Epidemics," Mass Communication and Society 11 (2008): 141-60.  
Shirley S. Ho, et al., "The Polls-Trends: Public Reactions to Global Health Threats and Infectious Diseases," Public Opinion Quarterly 71 (2007): 671-92. **[ABI/INFORM—just glance over this]**

Relevant books:

John M. Barry, The Great Influenza: The Story of the Greatest Pandemic in History. New York: Viking, 2004.

Mike Davis, The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu. New York: New Press, 2005.

Apr. 27: Social Security—Will the System Collapse?

Required reading:

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 3: Climate Change

Required reading:

Sheldon Ungar, "Bringing the Issue Back In: Comparing the Marketability of the Ozone Hole and Global Warming," Social Problems 45 (1998): 510-27. **[JSTOR]**

Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "Defeating Kyoto: The Conservative Movement's Impact of U.S. Climate Change Policy." Social Problems 50 (2003): 348-73. **[JSTOR]**

Roy W. Spencer, "How Serious Is the Global Warming Threat?," Society 30 (April, 2008): 111-21. [**Springer LINK**]

Relevant books:

Elizabeth Kolbert, Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change.  
New York: Bloomsbury, 2006.

Bjørn Lomborg, Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming.  
New York: Knopf, 2007.

May 10: Presentations

May 17: Presentations