



SOCI 2624 – LABOR & THE CONTEMPORARY PRISON (“PRISON LABOR”)

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Course Description

Sociology is the “study of society” that examines and questions patterns of social behavior. Criminology is the study of behavior deemed “criminal,” its changing definitions, its causes, and responses to it. In this course, we will explore sociological and criminological concepts and theories central to understanding labor in, at, around, and tied to the contemporary prison. We will move beyond common-sense understandings of these topics. The goal is for you to learn to critically evaluate the institution of penal labor, the work of prisoners and other individuals tied to the prison, the impacts of penal labor on the economy, and challenges that different groups encounter in the face of these phenomena. You will learn to apply theoretical “tools” to evaluate these elements of the social world and gain a better understanding of our social world and the lives of those within it.

Throughout the term, students are expected to be actively engaged and professional. *Students are encouraged to remain open to new or challenging material and perspectives on our topics, and to ask questions regarding course materials or objectives.*

Course Objectives

This course is intended to introduce you to several principles, methods, concepts, and perspectives used in sociology and criminology. Students will develop a more scientific approach to understanding these phenomena and will be encouraged to consider and challenge widely held beliefs that they may hold, or which they may encounter. The primary objective of the course is for students to think sociologically and critically about something which has been a largely taken-for-granted aspect of social life throughout history and to demonstrate this knowledge. These objectives will be met through course materials, discussion, and assignments.

Course Readings & Materials

There is no required textbook for this class. All readings and other materials will be made available through the Canvas course page.



READING LIST: THEMES, MATERIALS, & ASSIGNMENTS

Course Introduction & Defining Prison Labor

Reading: 📖 Ellis, 2020. “Prison Labor in a Pandemic”

Reflection: ❓ *Prisons are isolated (and isolating) institutions, the internal workings of which are often obscured from public view. With this in mind, what is your current image of prison labor in the United States? That is, what comes to mind when the words “work” and “prison” are said together in the same sentence? Feel free to draw on personal, news, pop culture, or other references/examples that you think of. This is the only reflection that won’t ask specific questions about the assigned materials—I want to know where your mind is at before we really dig into them!*

A Conceptual & Theoretical “Toolkit” From the Sociology of Work

Reading: 📖 Thompson, 2012. “The Prison Industrial Complex”

Reading: 📖 Vallas et al, 2009. *The Sociology of Work*, chapter 1

Handout: 📄 A “Toolkit” for the Sociology of Work (to accompany Vallas et al)

Reflection: ❓ *We can think of the different premises, principles, and theories from the Vallas chapter as “tools” that we will utilize throughout the quarter. Which of these tools feels the most interesting or promising to you right now? How do you expect this tool to be useful in looking at U.S. prison labor?*

Working at Prison: The Labor of Guards/Officers

Reading: 📖 Conover, 2001. *Newjack*, chapter 4

Videos: 🎥 Bauer, 2016. “My 4 Months as a Private Prison Guard” parts 1-6 ([YouTube](#))

Reflection: ❓ *Correctional officers and others working at prisons often report feeling isolated, unsupported, or misunderstood. After learning about Conover’s and Bauer’s experiences as well as the others that we explored in-class, what features of these jobs most stand out to you? How can our “toolkit” from the sociology of work help us understand these jobs and workers in new ways?*

Situating Prisoners’ Work: Legal Contexts

Reading: 📖 Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution

Reading: 📖 The “Abolition Amendment” Summary and Text

Reading: 📖 Colorado Amendment A (Colorado House Concurrent Resolution 18-1002)

Reading: 📖 CO DOC Regulation Number 850-03 (p. 1 – 4 required; the rest is optional)

Film: 🎥 13th ([YouTube](#)) [**Content warning: contains graphic depictions of violence**]

Video: 🎥 The Atlantic: Angola for Life ([YouTube](#))

Optional: 🎥 Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Prison Labor ([YouTube](#)) [**Content warning: contains adult language and humor**]

Reflection: ❓ *Is prison labor a form of slavery, in your view? Why/why not, exactly? What implications does this have for citizens who are compelled to work as a facet of their imprisonment? How do this week’s materials inform your view?*

Working in Prison: Views Of (& Viewing) Prison Labor

Reading: 📖 Feldman, 2019. “Anti-Heroes, Wildfire, & Complex Visibility of Prison Labor”

Podcast: 🎧 Ear Hustle, Episode 32: Snack Money ([online](#))

- Reading: 📖 Crittenden et al, 2018. “Being Assigned to Work in Prison”
- Reflection: ? *Just like the prison system in general, prisoners’ labor is often “out of sight and out of mind.” How did the images of this labor from this week’s materials compare to your prior expectations or assumptions about what work behind bars looks like? What jobs are available—and to whom? How can our toolkit from the sociology of work help us understand these issues?*

Working Against Prison: Labor Activism Inside & Outside

- Reading: 📖 Inside Higher Ed, 2020. “Public Universities, Prison-Made Furniture”
- Reading: 📖 Williams, 2016. “The Road to Private Prison Divestment”
- Reading: 📖 Jacobin, 2018. “The Movement against ‘Modern Day Slavery’”
- Reading: 📖 “Solid Black Fist” prison newsletter, issue 1 (excerpt)
- Podcast: 🎧 Millennials Are Killing Capitalism, 3/2021: In the Spirit of Abolition ([online](#))
- Reflection: ? *Forms of activism against current prison labor practices are abundant both inside and outside of the nation’s carceral facilities. What are your thoughts on the viability of (a) divestment campaigns and (b) prisoner labor strikes to address issues surrounding penal labor? How can our toolkit from the sociology of work help us situate these movements in societal and cultural context? Refer specifically to examples from our materials.*

Working after Prison: Incarceration, Labor, & Going Home

- Reading: 📖 Western, 2018. *Homeward*, chapter 6
- Podcast: 🎧 Ear Hustle, Episode 33: Life Shows Up ([online](#))
- Reflection: ? *Making the transition back into the free world after prison is challenging. Trying to find reliable work is central to this. Prison labor is often framed as rehabilitative—teaching skills, outlooks, and practices that are said to help reintegrate the formerly-imprisoned into society. How does this align with what this week’s materials tell us? How can our toolkit from the sociology of work help us understand the role of not only (a) prisoners’ work while they are inside prison, but (b) former prisoners’ role in and contributions to the labor market once they get out?*