

ECONOMICS 053

Spring 2019

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE DRUG WAR

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“Intellectual growth requires ‘the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable.’”

C. Vann Woodward.¹

This course explores the US government’s drug control policy, which criminalizes the possession and sale of selected drugs.

Among the questions explored will be the following: What impact does this policy have on the availability and price of illicit drugs? on drug use, on abuse? on violence? on property crime? on civil liberties? on public health? on social cohesion? and on our relationship with foreign countries? Should these drugs be decriminalized or legalized, and if so, how? Should the different illicit drugs be treated differently? What is the evidence in other countries as to the effect of their drug control policy? How can we stem the surging deaths from opioids?

This class is a seminar, not a lecture-exam course, as most of your other classes are. A seminar means that you all participate in a discussion about the material assigned for that class. My role will be as a moderator, not as a lecturer. So, to avoid distractions and allow for a relaxed atmosphere conducive to a conversation you will

TURN OFF AND PUT OUT OF SIGHT ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES DURING CLASS DISCUSSION. FAILURE TO ABIDE BY THIS RULE WILL AFFECT YOUR GRADE.

¹ Quoted in “The Trouble at Yale,” by David Cole, in The New York Review of Books, January 14, 2016.

Hopefully, the conversations will be uninhibited and free-wheeling within the bounds of decorum and mutual respect. All ideas and points of view should be welcomed for examination and criticism in a University classroom. As Yale informs all incoming freshmen: “You join a community where the ‘provocative, the disturbing, and the unorthodox’ must be tolerated.”²

Since conversation is the purpose of a seminar, you should not sign up for this course if you cannot commit to attending every class. There is no way you can “make up” for missed conversations, and absences are a loss for us all. Unexcused absences will of course affect your grade.

Course Format

At the beginning of each class turn off and put away all electronic devices. You will spend the first 10 minutes writing a Summary of the main ideas of the reading assignment for that day. You can consult the readings or any handwritten or typed notes. Your Summary should briefly describe the main arguments of the reading, so I can know you have read the material. These Summaries will provide material for the conversation. Summaries will be handed in at the end of class and of course I will read them. No grades will be assigned, and they will not be returned, but I may email you comments. Should you miss a class, write up your Summary at home, and hand it in at the next class.

In addition to the assigned readings, there are 2 required projects:

² Ibid.

1. You will interview someone who has had some involvement in the drug war, such as a police officer, a DA, a lawyer, a judge, a physician, a scientist, or even a friend or a relative. You will give an oral report of not more than 10 minutes to the class, including a typed handout for me of a paragraph or 2 summarizing the main results of your interview. I will hand out a roster on who speaks when.
2. You will write a paper (between 5 and 10 double-spaced pages) researching any of the questions related to the course topic and will present your findings to the class in an oral report of not more than 10 minutes. I will hand out a roster of who speaks when.

Every Thursday I will assign the readings for the upcoming week in class or by email.

Assigned readings will include 2 books written by myself in addition to selected readings. The books are:

How the Drug War Ruins American Lives, (Praeger, 2016)

and

Drugs: America's Holy War, (Routledge, 2009)

Grading: Sixty percent of your grade will depend on your Summaries and on your participation in class discussion. Twenty five percent on your paper and 15 percent on your interview. No final exam.