THE COURSE

This course is designed to introduce students to think sociologically about an understudied aspect of social life: transportation. In this course, we will examine how transport implicates – and is implicated by – historical, structural, and cultural processes. Drawing on a wide variety of interdisciplinary scholarship that deals with transport and society, we will collectively work towards thinking through a ‘sociology of transportation’. To this end, we will think through several different modes of transit in several cities across the world through salient analytical lenses. Some issues we will address in this course will be - the politics of transport planning, labor issues in transportation sector, gendered and racial experiences of transit, emotions (from road-rage to joyriding) and interactions on the road, narratives of automotive risk and ‘road safety’, and contemporary technological innovations.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Uncommon in its empirical object of inquiry, this course is an offering towards proposing a ‘sociology of transportation’. In doing so, this course has four main objectives. Firstly, this course seeks to bust the common myth that there is not enough scholarly work on transportation and its salience in constituting social life by presenting a wide array of rigorous academic work on this precise issue. Secondly, this course integrates sociological themes common to these works in order to weave together the disparate substantive concerns that animate the interdisciplinary roster of social-scientific scholarship on transport. Thirdly, the examination-requirements of this course necessitate that the students engage with the object of our collective inquiry using sociological methodology. Fourthly, this course is designed to be global in nature by taking into account empirical realities from all over the world – not just that of North America. The design of the readings of this course have been conscious in trying to instill as much of an international exposure to the students as possible. The hope is that by surveying a wide-ranging, albeit thematized, literature that concerns itself with transportation, students will develop analytical and conceptual tools to interpret the relationship between transportation and the world around us. Each week, we take up a major meta-theme that we devote ourselves to in a collective endeavor to develop scholarly prowess towards a ‘sociology of transportation’.

As a matter of disciplinary familiarity, this course makes use of the plethora of scholarship in sociology, anthropology, history, and critical geography while, consciously, neglecting urban planning perspectives. In doing so, this course offers a perspective that differs from a preoccupation with power relations of infrastructural concerns alone. Instead, it delves deeper into the interactions and cultural relations that become apparent when we foreground the role of transport in society. As with any course, it acknowledges the omission of some topographies, and of some analytical
concerns. However, in making this a survey course and in emphasizing its relatively novel foothold in contemporary sociology, some omissions are deemed inevitable.

REQUIRED TEXTS


All other readings will be provided by the instructor. The text above needs to be purchased, although an online copy is perhaps available.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chalk Posts</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short paper</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final paper or Exam</td>
<td>40%</td>
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Total 100%

1. **Class Participation:** This course is a discussion-based seminar that requires engagement and reflection of the course material both before and during class periods. Students are expected to attend class each week, engage fully in class discussion, and participate in in-class exercises. Being an active member of the class is likely the most important aspect of the course. You are each a valuable resource for each other and everyone’s participation will contribute to the depth and shape of what you will ultimately take away from this course. **This is, admittedly, a readings-heavy course so attendance in class will ensure fuller understanding of the material on hand.** Remember, attendance is half of participation. If nothing else, attend class regularly.

2. **Canvas Posts:** One chalk post per week. The readings for each week that qualify for the chalk post are marked with an asterisk. **You can pick one reading for the week amongst the ones marked with an asterisk** and write a 300-400 words canvas post for that reading alone. Summarize the paper or pick a fight with it – that’s up to you. At the end of the course, each student must have no less than 10 posts to their credit.

3. **Short Paper:** By the end of week 5, you will need to write a paper of 2000 words based on one of the three options. We will discuss in WEEK 3 the details of these assignments and all doubts will be clarified. For now, know that you have two options:

   **Option A:** Watch Betsy Kalin’s 2015 documentary *East LA Interchange* – available upon request – and conceptualize the film in terms of the readings between Week 1 to Week 3. Write a short essay analyzing key issues that are animated by the film. How do the social actors in the film push for the development of a freeway? How does the community resist this development? What do we understand about the politics of planning for transport infrastructure?
Option B: Clock 3 hours on any CTA bus OR 3 hours on a CTA train. Observe carefully the behavior of the people on these modes of transit. Take down copious notes about any interactions that capture your attention – who talks to who, how people entertain themselves on these rides, who seems lost, who seems to fall asleep, who seems comfortable with the transit, etc. Write a short essay analyzing your observations keeping in mind the themes elicited in Week 4 and the first part of Week 5.

Option C: Write a book review of Latour, Bruno 1996. *Aramis, or, The love of technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. (e-copy will be made available upon request; book will be placed in library reserve; copies will be ordered at SemCoop)

4. Final Paper OR Exam: For the final paper too, either write a 3000 words essay based on one of the two options OR choose the ‘exam’ option. We will discuss in WEEK 7 or 8 the details of these assignments, especially how to execute them.

Option A: Interview one person who drives for Uber/Lyft. Interview one of the drivers of UChicago Shuttle. Compare and contrast the labor conditions of both the drivers in line with the texts we have read in class. (Details TBD)

Option B: Collect ten newspaper articles (do a simple Google keyword search) for one of the two following items. After collecting the newspaper articles, do an analysis of how this issue has been discussed across the ten articles. Pick 2 analytical themes that you can work with, based on the readings for the course. Here are the two stories you could track across several platforms:

- Self-driving cars and Road Safety
- Racism and Airline Travel

OR

Exam: If you wish, you can do a take-home exam instead of a final paper. For this exam, you will be given a prompt based on the readings and analytical concerns addressed in this course. The prompt will be handed to you at the end of Week 10 and you will have seven days to turn the exam in. Essay cannot be more than 3000 words.

ACCESSIBILITY

If you require special assistance, please email me or call 773.702.8637 in advance. Every effort will be made to ensure equitable access and accessibility. In case of any other concerns you have vis-à-vis class participation, course content or class attendance, please email me.

READINGS

All of the course readings not included in the required texts section of the syllabus are available on Canvas under “Library Course Reserves.” Please read in the order listed each week. Under “Additional Readings” are texts you can read if you’re interested in the topic beyond the scope of the syllabus. They are not required to be read in the course.
I. **Week One – Modern Times**

**Class A: Sociology and Transportation**

- Discussion of course Logistics (20 minutes)
- Introductory Lecture (20 minutes) – “Why should sociology care about transport?”

**Reading:**


**Class B: How did we get here?**

  
  o “The Mechanization of Motive Power” (Chapter 1; pp 1-15)
  o “The American Railroad” (Chapter 6; 89-112)
  o “Railroad Space and Railroad Time” (Chapter 3; pp 33-44)


**Additional Reading:**


II. **Week Two – The Politics of Transit**

**Class A: Power Matters**


**Additional Reading:**

- Yago, Glenn. “Twentieth Century Mass Transit in German and US cities” (Chapter 2; pp 8-27)
Life in Transit: Transportation and Society

Class B: Whose Transit Is It Anyway?


III. Week Three: Urban Aspirations and Transport Imaginaries

Class A: Visions of modernity


Additional Reading:


Class B: Promises of mobility

Additional Reading:


IV. **Week Four: Experiencing Transit**

Class A: Driving in The City


Class B: Being a commuter


Additional Reading:


V. **Week Five: Micro-interactions and transnational connections**

Class A: Transit Sociality

Class B: Colonial and Postcolonial Contestations

- Bhimull, Chandra. D., 2013. reshaping Empire: airline travelers and Colonial Encounters in the 1930s. Transfers, 3(1), pp.45-64. (Or, excerpt from book Empire In The Air by same author)

Additional Reading


VI. Week Six: The Labor of Transit

Class A: Transport Workers (Part One)


Class B: Transport Workers (Part Two)

VII.  **Week Seven: “All work and no play…”**

**Class A: “Unruly” pleasures**


**Additional Reading:**


**Class B: Beyond pleasure**


**Additional Reading:**


VIII.  **Week Eight: Race and Gender in Transit**

**Class A: Race and Transportation**

Also read (Newspaper article):

Yam, Kimberly. 2018. “Fresh Off The Boat highlights why the ‘Bad Asian Driver’ stereotype is ridiculous: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fresh-off-the-boat-highlights-ridiculous-bad-asian-driver-stereotype-truly-is_us_5bdcaf99e4b04367a87c8a8e

And, if time permits,


Class B: Gender and Transportation


Also read:


IX. Week Nine: Safety and Risk in Transit

Class A: Death in Transit? (Part One)

Additional Reading:


Class B: Death in Transit? (Part Two)


Additional Readings:


X. Week Ten: Future of Transit

Class A: Algorithmic Authorities


Class B: Sustainability and Social Practice


- Discussion of course content and key concepts
  + End-term paper discussion
  + Feedback and thoughts