

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Semester: Spring 2006

Course Number: STSS 4964

Section Number: 01. Room Sage 2701

T & F 2-3.50pm

Course Name: Religion and Society

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Office Hours: 12-1.45pm and by appointment

NOTE: This course carries social science credit only. If you would like this course to count toward your humanities credits, please see me.

...in both science and theology,  
the central question is, and remains,  
the question of truth. John Polkinghorne  
(1998: 47)

Tradition endures.

Akan proverb (Ghana)

The Master said, "A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and sees a question only from one side." CONFUCIUS, Analects 2.14

TEXTS

David Hume (1711-1776), *Does God Exist?* (Barricade Books, New York: 1995). Selections from the writings of the philosopher David Hume with commentary by sociologist Ferdinand Lundberg.

A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral: A Biography of Faith and Doubt in Western Civilization* (Ballantine Books, New York: 1999)

Karen Armstrong, *Buddha* (Viking, New York: 2001)

Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History Revised and Updated* (Modern Library, New York: 2002).

James A. Beckford, *Social Theory & Religion* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 2003).

On electronic reserve

Karen E. Fields, "Religion as an Eminently Social Thing," introduction to her translation of Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (The Free Press, NY, 1995; orig. publ. in French 1912). Pages xvii-lxxiii.

Sal Restivo, "The Social Construction of Religion," from Sal Restivo, *The Sociological Worldview* (Blackwell, New York, 1991).149-159.

Randall Collins, "The Sociology of God," from Randall Collins, *Sociological Insight*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford, New York: 1992). Pages 30-59.

FIRST! WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY? As a way to help us all get on the same page sociologically right at the beginning, I am including the following materials from my Sociology syllabus.

An interviewer is trying to get the writer Ernest Hemingway to identify what it takes to be a great writer. “As the interviewer offered a list of various possibilities, Hemingway disparaged each in sequence. Finally, frustrated, the interviewer asked, ‘Isn’t there any one essential ingredient that you can identify?’ Hemingway replied, ‘Yes, there is. In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in, schockproof crap detector.’

It seems to us that, in his response, Hemingway identified an essential survival strategy and essential function of the schools in today’s world. One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of ‘crap.’” Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Dell, NY: 1969).

“...without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow. In our society, which is so fundamentally anti-intellectual, critical thinking is not encouraged.” Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, NY: 1994).

An anti-intellectual society is a breeding ground for bullshit (“crap”). Sal Restivo, 2005

## THE AGE OF THE SOCIAL 1840-2040

A cautionary principle: if you are going to approach sociology, do not bring your radical, conservative, liberal stickers with you ready to slap them on every idea you encounter. There are tools you can use for rooting out ideologies in the physical and social sciences, but the ones you have been given at this stage are woefully inadequate. You might want to think about education as providing you with crap detectors, and the more educated you are the better your collection of crap detectors.

Watch out for other discourse barriers that might interfere with open communication. In particular, remember that we label words “vulgar,” and identify certain words as “swear” or “curse” words in order to stratify conversations and conversational contexts. Difference is at work here, and difference does not always speak to truth. Such words are often commonly and more or less unproblematically encountered in everyday life. They are problematic, however, when encountered in certain contexts. Don’t take for granted that this contextual distinction is good for inquiry.

Course readings and schedule begins on page 7.

Some of the major figures in the Social Science Copernican Revolution



Ibn Khaldun (1332-1395), an ancestral founder of the revolution



Madame de Staël (1766-1817), a precursor of the revolution

The Revolutionary Cadre



Karl Marx (1818-1883)



Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)



Max Weber (1864-1920)



Emile Durkheim (1857-1917)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)



Jane Addams (1860-1935)

I have given the name “The Age of the Social” to the period 1840-2040 to represent the Copernican-like revolution in our understanding of society and culture, and of the “individual” as a social construction. The individual is not the center of the social universe. Now society, culture, the group, the collective are at the center of the social universe. The Copernican revolution in the social sciences has led to a series of worldview shifting discoveries. These discoveries have remained largely invisible to the public, including the educated public. The fundamental theorem – the central dogma - behind this revolution is that people (selves and minds) and their behaviors and institutions (including family, friendship, science, religion, love, sex, war, and peace) are – to use sociological shorthand – “social constructs.” There is a great deal of confusion about the concept of “social construction,” especially in terms of its use in the sociology of science. I will do my best to clarify this idea and demonstrate that it means nothing more and nothing less than that everything human beings do, think, and feel is a product of their interactions with each other and with the material world. There are no other sources of human action and human thought.

This course is an elementary introduction to sociology as a discovering science.. It is an introduction to a perspective, a way of looking at the world around us. It is not my objective to “prove” anything to you (proofs require proof communities, and until you are a member of such a community in the social sciences, proofs make no sense). I make certain assumptions that you should be familiar with. Sociology is a science. To say this does not mean that sociology is a sort of physics of society. What it does mean is that sociology follows certain general procedures associated with scientific inquiry. We will learn more about this – that is, the very nature of science as a social and cultural phenomenon – in one of the core readings for this course. The upshot of this is that you should not think of sociology as a philosophical discourse. Astrologers have no legitimacy in an astronomy class; opinions, ideas, and theories are not all equal in a sociology classroom. As a scientific discipline, sociology has built a structure of facts and near

facts, proofs that are more or less formal (within the proof community of sociology itself, in the same way that mathematical proofs are only proofs within the proof community of mathematics), findings based on experiments, mathematical models, surveys, ethnographic research, and other methods. Some of what we know in sociology is not yet adequately codified, and my confidence here is based on a form of proof known as consiliency of evidences or ensemble of probabilities. Here the evidence, while not formally or systematically organized and codified, is overwhelming by virtue of its sheer quantity combined with the convergence of many different factual tracks.

It is impossible to leap into sociology at its most scientific levels without first becoming familiar with the basic concepts and the perspective that define this field of study. I suggest, therefore, that you think of this course as a visit to a new and unfamiliar culture, and that you think of me as what anthropologists call an “informant,” that is, someone from that culture who has agreed to be your guide to this culture – to its language and to its ways of living and thinking. Another way to think about what we will be doing is to imagine I open a window for you and I point to a bunch of people outside who are practicing sociologists and just let you watch and listen to them for a while.

You will find that many of the things sociologists like me take for granted violate some of the basic things you take for granted for about the world and how it works at the human level. There are many reasons for this, reasons that have to do with how any society disables your ability to see into the inner working of your self and your social worlds. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from John LeCarre’s novel, *Absolute Friends* (2003: 326):

...I am speaking of something even more important to the development of Western society than the ballot box. I am speaking of the deliberate corruption of young minds at their most formative stage. Of the lies that are forced on them from the cradle onwards by corporate or state manipulation, if there’s a difference anymore between the two, which I begin to doubt. I am speaking of the encroachment of corporate power on every university campus in the first, second, and third worlds. I am speaking of educational colonization by means of corporate investment at faculty level, conditional upon the observation untrue nostrums that are advantageous to the corporate investor, and deleterious for the poor fuck of a student...I am speaking of the deliberate curtailment of free thought in our society...

If you wish to chalk this up to literary license – it is a novel, after all – consider the supportive scholarly arguments, studies, and discussions in such books as Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States 1492-Present* (Harper Perennial, 1995), and James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Simon and Schuster, 1995). See also the two volumes edited by Russ Kick: *You Are Being Lied To*; and *Everything You Know is Wrong* (The Disinformation Company, Ltd. 2001 and 2002).

*Fundamentally, there is no right education except growing up into a worthwhile world.* Paul Goodman

As long as you still experience the stars as something “above you” you lack *the eye of knowledge*. F. Nietzsche

*Maturity – consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play* F. Nietzsche.

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe – H.G. Wells

*In evolutionary perspective, the crisis we confront is inextricably the crisis of the state as a predatory form of political organization, born, nurtured, and spread by the sword.* MARVIN HARRIS

#### A PRELUDE ON HONESTY.

*You must make your experiences “a matter of conscience for knowledge. ‘What did I really experience? What happened in me and around me at that time? Was my reason bright enough? Was my will opposed to all deceptions of the senses and bold in resisting the fantastic?’” You must not “thirst after things that go against reason.”*

*We others, who thirst after reason, are determined to scrutinize our experiences as severely as a scientific experiment-hour after hour, day after day. We ourselves wish to be our experiments and guinea pigs.*

F. Nietzsche

#### A WARNING TO THE INSTRUCTOR AND HIS STUDENTS.

*[Marco Polo returns home from China]. On his way home, in Java ,he saw some animals that resembled unicorns, because they had a single horn on their muzzles, and because an entire tradition had prepared him to see unicorns, he identified these animals as unicorns. But because he was naïve and honest, he could not refrain from telling the truth. And the truth was that the unicorns he saw were very different from a millennial tradition. They were not white but black. They had pelts like buffalo, and their hooves were as big as elephants. “ Their horns, too, were not white but black, their tongues were spiky, and their heads looked like wild boars” In fact, what Marco Polo saw was the rhinoceros.*

The real problem of a critique of our own cultural models is to ask, when we see a unicorn, if by chance it is not a rhinoceros. Umberto Eco

#### Warming up

*...I would not be doing the work I do, the thinking and writing I love, were it not for the many neighbors (mostly older black women) who gave me literature to read that broadened my horizons*

*and the teachers and librarians who enabled me to pursue my longing for knowledge. Their generosity was an example to me. I endeavor to teach students that same generosity and care. Like my teachers, I do not simply hope that students will learn necessary facts and details. I hope they will learn to think critically in ways that strengthen their capacity to be self-actualized. bell hooks*

*The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity. George Herbert Mead*

The historical development of the social sciences, and of sociology and anthropology in particular, is the history of the rejection of transcendence and the supernatural, immanence, psychologism, and philosophism.

Sal Restivo

WILL THE REAL KARL MARX (FINALLY) STAND UP, PLEASE!

*In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.*  
MARX AND ENGELS

*It was not for nothing, but with deliberate design, that the men of old introduced to the masses notions about the gods and views on the after-life. POLYBIUS, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE*

*Religion is the opiate of the people. KARL MARX*

*Religion is an intellectual error. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE*

*Religion is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity. SIGMUND FREUD*

*Religion is the cyanide of the masses. TOM ROBBINS*

*He [man] has imagined a heaven, and has left entirely out of it the supremest of all his delights, the one ecstasy that stands first and foremost in the heart of every individual of his race-and of ours-sexual intercourse!* Letters from the Earth, MARK TWAIN

*Every child, before family indoctrination passes a certain point and primary school indoctrination begins, is generally at least, an artist, a visionary, and a revolutionary. DAVID COOPER, in The Death of the Family*

*As far back as I can remember my father and mother directed me how to act. They used to tell me, "Do not use a bad word which you wouldn't like to be used to you. Do not feel that you are anyone's enemy. In playing with children remember this: do not take anything from another child. Don't take arrows away from another boy just because you are bigger than he is. Don't take his marbles away. Don't steal from your friends. Don't be unkind to your playmates. If you are kind*

now, when you become a man you will love your fellow-men.” [An adult Apache in the late 1930s recalls his childhood].

*Love can...be understood as a sharing of one another's independent growth, rather than as a possessive curtailment of growth.... The difference between closed marriage and open marriage is the difference between coercion and choice.* GEORGE & NENA O'NEILL

[Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed](#), Jared Diamond (2004):

In his million-copy bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond examined how and why Western civilizations developed the technologies and immunities that allowed them to dominate much of the world. Now in this brilliant companion volume, Diamond probes the other side of the equation: What caused some of the great civilizations of the past to collapse into ruin, and what can we learn from their fates? As in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond weaves an all-encompassing global thesis through a series of fascinating historical-cultural narratives. Moving from the Polynesian cultures on Easter Island to the flourishing American civilizations of the Anasazi and the Maya and finally to the doomed Viking colony on Greenland, Diamond traces the fundamental pattern of catastrophe. Environmental damage, climate change, rapid population growth, and unwise political choices were all factors in the demise of these societies, but other societies found solutions and persisted. Similar problems face us today and have already brought disaster to Rwanda and Haiti, even as China and Australia are trying to cope in innovative ways. Despite our own society's apparently inexhaustible wealth and unrivaled political power, ominous warning signs have begun to emerge even in ecologically robust areas like Montana. Brilliant, illuminating, and immensely absorbing, *Collapse* is destined to take its place as one of the essential books of our time, raising the urgent question: How can our world best avoid committing ecological suicide?



Let the games begin.....

And now...for something completely different...



"You are right," replied Jesus, "I am a king. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I came into the world - to give testimony to the truth. Only he who is open to the truth gives ear to my voice." "What is truth?" Pilate said to him...  
THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN, 18:37-38  
THE NEW TESTAMENT

I can imagine that God created a world without any laws: a chaos in short.  
But the notion that statistical laws are final, and that God draws a lot, is  
highly unsympathetic to me.  
ALBERT EINSTEIN

By truth is the earth sustained, and by the sun are the heavens...  
THE RIG VEDA

Course objectives: This course is designed to introduce you to the sociological and anthropological perspective on religion and the gods. This is an anti-

transcendental, anti-supernatural, and anti-miraculous perspective. The version of social science I practice is known as sociological materialism (see also cultural materialism). In practice, I am concerned in this class with providing an environment in which you and we can explore personal and perennial questions about religion, god, the soul, spirituality, faith, and belief in a variety of philosophical, historical, and social science contexts and across a variety of religious traditions.

#### Schedule

January 17 Introduction and Orientation I

No reading for 1/20

1/20 Introduction and Orientation II

Read pp. 1-30 in Hume for 1/24

1/24 Hume on "Miracles."

Read pp. 31-49 in Hume for 1/27

1/27 Hume on God and Causality

Read pp. 51-121 in Hume for 1/31

1/31 Hume on the Natural History of Religion

Read Lundberg's "Introduction" to Hume for 2/3

2/3 A Sociologist Reads Hume on God and Religion

The Star of David is the primary modern emblem of the Jewish religion. How it came to be such is a matter of some debate. Legend has it that the emblem was used by the Biblical King David (hence the name 'Magen David,' or shield of David). In reality, it was not associated specifically with the faith until the middle ages, when it began to appear on flags, tombstones, and synagogue decorations. It is probably not coincidental that the symbol was important to the flourishing kabbalistic tradition of the same time period. Kabbalistically, the hexagram symbolizes the six directions of space, the divine union of male and female energy, and the four elements.

□

The Chi Rho is one of the earliest cruciform symbols used by Christians. It is formed by superimposing the first two letters of the word "Christ" in Greek, chi = ch and rho = r. Although not technically a cross, the Chi Rho invokes the crucifixion of Jesus as well as symbolizing his status as the Christ. The earliest evidence of the Chi Rho symbol is Constantine's use of it on the labarum, the imperial standard, in the early 4th century CE.

□

Read Chapters 1 & 2 in Wilson for 2/7

2/7 God's Funeral and Hume Revisited

Read Chapter 3 for 2/10

2/10 The Religion of Humanity

Read Chapters 4, 5, & 6 for 2/14

2/14 Believing and Not Believing

Read Chapter 7 for 2/17

2/17 George Eliot, the Word, and Lives of Jesus

Read Chapters 8, 9, & 10 for 2/24

2/24 Modernity and the Gods I

There is arguably no more important and pressing topic than the relation of science and religion in the modern world. Science is clearly one of the most profound methods that humans have yet devised for discovering truth, while religion remains the single greatest force for generating meaning.

Ken Wilber (1998: 3)

Read Chapters 11 & 12 for 2/28

2/28 Modernity and the Gods II

Read Chapters 13 & 14 for 3/3

- 3/3 Modernity and the Gods III  
Read Chapter 15 for 3/7
- 3/7 Modernity and the Gods IV  
Read Collins, "The Sociology of God" for 3/10
- 3/10 The Sociology of God  
Read Chapters 1 & 2 in Islam. □
- SPRING BREAK 3/13-19
- 3/21 Islam: Beginnings and Development  
Read Chapter 3 in Islam for 3/24
- 3/24 Islam: Culmination  
Read Chapter 4 in Islam for 3/28
- 3/28 Islam Triumphant  
Read Chapter 5 and epilogue in Islam for 3/31
- 3/31 Islam Agonistes  
Read Chapters 1, 2, and 3 in Buddha for 4/4 □
- 4/4 Buddhism I  
Read Chapter 4 in Buddha for 4/7
- 4/7 Buddhism II  
Read Chapters 5 & 6 for 4/11
- 4/11 Buddhism III  
Read Restivo, "The Social Construction of Religion" for 4/14
- 4/14 The Sociology of Religion  
Read Fields, "Religion as an Eminently Social Thing" for 4/18
- 4/18 The Social Construction of Religions and the Gods I  
Read Beckford, "Introduction" for 4/21
- 4/21 The Social Construction of Religions and the Gods II  
Read Beckford, Chapters 1, 2, & 3 for 4/25
- 4/25 Social Construction III  
Read Chapter 4 for 4/28
- 4/28 Globalization and Religion  
Read Chapters 5 & 6 for 5/2
- 5/2 The Truth of Religion, the Truth of Sociology

Scientific truth "refers to a transcendental world in the same way that the sacred sphere of its totems and gods rises beyond the mundane life of a tribe."

Randall Collins (1993: 302)

#### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Class attendance. If you anticipate missing more than three classes (excused or unexcused absences), please see me. More than three absences will reduce your grade.

One or two page comments on the readings are due each Friday. These will be graded P/F.

This is a project-based course. You will work in groups (individual projects will be approved in special cases) and develop two presentations due March 10th and May 11th. Details about the projects will be discussed in class and you will be able to examine exemplars from previous classes. Projects will be graded on a 10-point scale reflecting the degree to which the project reflects the objectives of the course and engages the theory and research covered in the readings and in class discussions. Projects will also be evaluated for creativity and general organization. The March 10th presentation will be a preliminary sketch of your final project using Power Point. The presentation should be approximately six slides in length. Your final project can be presented in Power Point or as a three panel poster.

Everyone will write a final five page essay, typed and double-spaced, on their contributions to their project and the impact of the course (including the readings) on their project work. These essays will be graded on a 10 point scale.

Final grades are determined as follows: You must turn in at least 13 comments papers to qualify for a grade. 13 Ps = 80 points, 9-12 Ps = 60 points, 6-8 Ps = 40 points, 0-5 Ps = 10 points. Each project is worth 10 points. Grades fall out as follows: 90-100 = A; 80-89 = B; 70-79 = C; 60-69 = D; 59 and lower = F.

#### INTRODUCTORY BIBLIOGRAPHY/VIDEOGRAPHY

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- Publishers, Oxford: 1993).
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- Bibliographical Supplement

The nature of religion.

"What is religion? The Search of the Classic Tradition," Section 1 in A.M. Greeley (ed.), *Sociology and Religion: A Collection of Readings* (Harper/Collins, NY: 1995): excerpts from the works of Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Malinowski, Weber, Parsons, Geertz, and Otto.

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See the bibliographical essay, pages 254-256 for Davies' suggestions on further reading.

#### What is Science and an Historical Overview of the Interaction of Science and Religion

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#### INSTRUCTOR'S BIOSKETCH

DR. SAL RESTIVO is Professor of Sociology and Science Studies in the Department  
of Science and Technology Studies, and Professor of Information Technology in  
the Information Technology Program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy,  
New York. He also holds the position of Special Professor in the School of  
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of and a former president (1994/95) of the Society for Social Studies of Science. He is also the founding editor of the State University of New York Press series on Science, Technology, and Society, and was the first director of Rensselaer's PhD program in Science and Technology Studies. Dr. Restivo is an honor graduate in electrical engineering of Brooklyn Technical High School (New York City), and was one of the eleven inaugural inductees into the school's Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame (1998). Dr. Restivo is the author of *The Social Relations of Physics, Mysticism, and Mathematics* (1983), *The Sociological Worldview* (1991), *Mathematics in Society and History* (1992), *Science, Society, and Values: Toward a Sociology of Objectivity* (1994), and *Science, Technology, and Society: A Sociological Perspective* (2005, with Wenda Bauchspies and Jennifer Croissant). He is also co-editor (with C.K. Vanderpool) of *Comparative Studies in Science and Society* (1974) and co-editor (with J.P. Van Bendegem and Roland Fischer) of *Math Worlds: Philosophical and Social Studies of Mathematics and Mathematics Education* (1993); and he co-edited *Degrees of Compromise: Industrial Interests and Academic Values* with Jennifer Croissant (2001). He is the Editor-in-Chief of Oxford University Press' *Science, Technology, and Society: An Encyclopedia* (2005). During the course of his career, Dr. Restivo has carried out several ethnographic studies of science and engineering laboratories, done research on the historical sociology of science and mathematics, studied and been a consultant on problems of science policy for government agencies in the U.S., South America, and Great Britain, and worked on problems in the education of scientists and engineers. He is currently developing a sociological theory of mind, brain, and thinking (and writing *The Mind Manifesto*), and working on a number of books, including *Nietzsche's Revenge: The End of God, Mind, and Science*. He has also written a novel that he is seeking a publisher for, *Bring Me the Brain of Nikola Tesla*. And *The Rejection of Transcendence: Physics, Mysticism, and Society* is a proposal for a second edition of Part I of his *The Social Relations of Physics, Mysticism, and Mathematics*. He is the developer of the Draw a Brain protocols for studying people's concepts and images of brain, mind, and emotions. His current research focuses on the sociology of mind and brain, and he is also a member of a research team studying magic & culture (this study includes research at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, where he is a member of the Academy of Magical Arts).

Dr. Restivo's research has been supported by grants and fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the U.S. Office of Education as well as a number of overseas agencies. During 1985-1986, he was a Visiting National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow doing research on the historical sociology of mathematics at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology at Victoria College, University of Toronto. During the 1994-95 academic year, he spent the Fall semester lecturing in Great Britain. In the spring, he was Belgian National Research Foundation Professor at the Free University in Brussels, and Nordic Research Academy Professor at the universities of Gothenburg (Sweden) and Roskilde (Denmark). Dr. Restivo was appointed Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Education at Birmingham University (UK) for 1998-99. In May 1999 he was Visiting Lecturer in mathematics and mathematics education at Copenhagen University. In April 2000, RPI awarded him the Jerome Fischbach Travel Grant in recognition of his educational contributions to the Institute. During 2002-04 he was at Harvey Mudd College as the Hixon/Riggs Visiting Professor of Science, Technology, and Society.

Dr. Restivo, a collegiate weightlifter, became the Physical Director of the former Shelton Towers Hotel in New York City in the early 1960s while working as an instructor in the Vic Tanny gym chain. He was president and a coach of the City College of New York Weightlifting Team and Club. He has also served as a weightlifting and powerlifting official and judge for the American

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