Course Aims

The aims of this course are fourfold:

1. To engage students in serious examination of the concept of social justice. What is a just society? What are its defining moral principles? What political, social and economic institutions are required to realize justice? What relationships must citizens have with one another in order to realize and sustain a just society?

2. To examine contemporary patterns of racial and economic inequality in the United States. This examination informs two further questions: First, how well does the contemporary United States realize social justice as a whole (as well as its component parts)? Second, what are the barriers to achieving a greater measure of social justice in the United States?

3. To expose students firsthand to community problems in Richmond, Virginia that are related to the distribution of social and economic opportunities and to historical patterns of racial and economic segregation. This exposure is intended to compel students to reflect upon the ways in which patterns of social justice and injustice impact particular persons and communities.

4. To engage students in considering how social justice might be better realized or advanced in the 21st century U.S., primarily by considering current community efforts in Richmond, VA that seek to expand educational and economic opportunity.

This term the course is divided into eight sections:

1. The American Context of Racial Domination and Injustice
2. Plato’s Republic: The Good Society and the Good Soul
3. John Rawls’s Account of Justice as Fairness
4. The American Political Economy: Inequality and Poverty
5. Education and Social (Im)mobility
6. Class and the Cultural Divide
7. Housing and Urban Political Economy
8. Community Wealth Building as a Paradigm for Justice-Building

In addition, the course has a significant semester-long community based learning requirement in which students work with organizations seeking to address community needs in Richmond.

The scope of this syllabus is ambitious and the pace of the course is intense, as befits the importance of the topic and the challenge of thinking (and acting) clearly about justice.

Class Requirements

1. Community Based Learning placement: 30 hours on main site. Students will work with Dr. Kerstin Soderlund to establish placements for the semester.
Successful completion and verification of mandatory community based learning is a requirement of a passing grade in this course.

2. One two-page response paper to Tyson book (“practice paper”) Required but ungraded
3. Four (4) four page analytical papers (Papers 1-4) 45%
4. One (1) six page analytical paper (Paper 5) 15%
5. One (1) twelve-page final paper integrating community based learning 30%
6. Attendance, preparation for class, and consistent participation 10%

Notes on Written Assignments

The five analytical papers will be based on analysis of the course material in the first seven sections of the course. Essay questions will be assigned the week prior to the due date (7 days or more). Tips on writing for this course will be distributed prior to the first paper.

The final twelve page paper will require students to integrate their community based learning experience with course material throughout the course, especially content in section 5 (on community wealth building in Richmond). Detailed instructions for the final paper will be distributed one month before the final due date.

General Course Policies

1. Arrive prior to 9 am. every class so we can start at 9 a.m.
2. Get enough sleep (six hours) before you come, and eat breakfast.
3. Coffee in class is okay, but food is not.
4. Go to the bathroom before class. Do not interrupt class by doing so.
5. No electronic devices in use in class. All cell phones must be completely powered off and stored away.
6. Bring your book to class every time.
7. No class absences without permission are acceptable. Each unexcused absence will lead to a full letter grade drop in your semester participation grade. Falling asleep in class or other disruptive behavior will be treated as an absence.
8. Every student must attend professor’s office hours at least once prior to fall break.

How and Why to READ for this Class

Reading must be the fundamental default activity of all college students. When you are not doing anything else, you should be reading. This class will require that you do a lot of reading.

We live in a culture that has devalued deep reading and thinking. Why then read books, as opposed to just a series of short articles or excerpts? Because books are still the best technology we have for allowing a sophisticated train of thought—or body of knowledge—to be communicated from one human mind to another. A book allows the author to explore an event, person, or question in sustained depth, to present a sustained argument supported by evidence, to make connections between different events or phenomena, or to explore all sides of a disputed question thoroughly. Or a book may simply expand or stimulate our imaginations, our moral consciences, our sense of what is possible in human life. To read an interesting, important, or
imagination-expanding book is one of life’s great pleasures—but it is a pleasure it takes effort to cultivate. Think of reading a book as engaging your mind with someone else’s mind in an extended, in-depth conversation. If your reading takes the form of a thoughtful, internal conversation with the author, when it comes time to write your papers—your actual chance to “talk back” to the author and his or her ideas—you won’t be struggling to generate material from scratch; instead you will simply be transcribing and refining the conversation you’ve already had in your brain. Good writing is fundamentally a result of good thinking, and good thinking comes about via the practice and habit of being in conversation with good thinkers—such as the authors we will be reading this semester.

But how then to read thoughtfully? First, cut out the distractions. Turn off social media, the Internet, and anything else that might tempt you to turn your mind away from what you are reading. Find a quiet space where you can concentrate fully on the text. Second, set yourself an attainable goal for how long you will concentrate fully on reading the text. Whether it’s thirty minutes, an hour, or two hours, set a goal, and stick to that goal, with the aim of increasing it over time. If you can learn how to sit in the library or somewhere for three consecutive hours, reading for 45-50 minutes at time, then taking 10-15 minute breaks each hour, you will over the course of the week get a lot done—and more importantly, have a lot of fruitful conversations with great thinkers and writers. Third, take notes as you go—either in the text margins, or in a notebook. This is helpful in keeping track of the author’s train of thought, and will help you remember arguments and key points when you go back to review or re-read. Fourth, when you are done reading a section, write down a few key points the author made, or alternatively some questions you have about the author’s arguments. Fifth, as you are reading, think not just about the face value arguments of the text, but also about the author’s intended audience and purpose. Why and for whom was this book written? Being able to answer that question often is very helpful in understanding the text as a whole. Sixth—and this is the most advanced skill, and one that will take time to master—think critically about what you are reading. Even the most brilliant texts, texts that have impeccable internal logic and that will make you smarter simply by reading them, have limitations of perspective and purpose. What does a text written over two thousand years ago about the human condition have to say that is of enduring value to us today? Plato can’t answer that question—it is our job as students to answer that question ourselves.
OVERVIEW OF COURSE OF STUDY

I. Context: Racial Domination and Injustice in America

Wednesday August 30. Timothy Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, Chapters 1-3

Friday September 1. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, Chapters 4-11


II. Plato’s Republic: The Just Society and the Just Soul


Wednesday September 13. Plato, *Republic*, Books II and III

Friday September 15. Plato, *Republic*, Books IV and V

Wednesday September 20. Plato, *Republic*, Books VI and VI

Friday September 22. Plato, *Republic*, Books VIII, IX; The Myth of Er (Book X)

*Paper 1 due Monday September 25, 6 p.m.*

III. John Rawls: Justice as Fairness

Wednesday September 27. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Chapter One (Sections 1-8)


*Paper 2 due Monday October 9, 6 p.m.*

IV. American Political Economy: Inequality and Poverty

Wednesday October 11. Peter Temin, *The Vanishing Middle Class: Prejudice and Power in a New Economy*, Chapters 1-4

Friday October 13. Peter Temin, *The Vanishing Middle Class*, Chapters 5-8.


Friday October 20. Edin and Shaefer, *$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Chapters 4 and 5 and Conclusion. (Guest speaker: Sandee Smith, BLISS program, City of Richmond)

*Paper 3 due Monday October 23, 6 p.m.*
V. Education and Social (Im)mobility

Wednesday October 25. Temin, *Vanishing Middle Class*, Chapter 10; Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed*, Sections 1-10

Friday October 27. Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed*, Sections 11-23. [Guest speaker: Jenee Pearson, KidBliss, City of Richmond]

Wednesday November 1. Temin, *Vanishing Middle Class*, Chapter 9; Beth Zasloff and Joshua Steckel, *Hold Fast to Dreams*, Chapters 1, 3 and 8.

Friday November 3. Zasloff and Steckel, *Hold Fast to Dreams* (each student pick one additional family). [Invited speaker: Jessica Pare, RVA Future]

*Paper 4 due Monday November 6, 6 p.m.*

VI. Class and the Cultural Divide


November 15. Goldstein, *Janesville*, Sections 4-6

VII. Housing and Urban Political Economy


December 1. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted*, Part Three. [Invited speakers: Scott Andrews-Weckerly and Nikki Patterson, Richmond City Health District]

*Paper 5 (SIX PAGES) Due Monday December 4, 6 p.m.*

VIII. Community Wealth Building/Building Justice in Richmond

December 6. Overcoming poverty in the City of Richmond: overview of the work of the Office of Community Wealth Building. [Guest speaker Valaryee Mitchell, Center for Workforce Innovation, City of Richmond]

December 8. Office of Community Wealth Building continued; final reflections

*Final (Twelve Page) Paper Due Monday December 18, 6 p.m.*