

Justice and Civil Society, Fall 2026

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Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond

Course Meeting Time: Tuesdays/Thursdays, 12:00-1:15.

Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:30-5:30, or by appointment.

I. Aims of the Course and Learning Outcomes

Justice and Civil Society engages fundamental questions of social justice at both the theoretical and practical level, taking as our context the present-day United States.

This semester, our focus will be fourfold:

- Examination of various theoretical perspectives on justice and what a just society entails, drawing on both historical and contemporary texts;
- Examination of the socio-economic structure of the present-day United States, including economic inequality, poverty, racial disparities, and systems of power;
- Consideration of how both theories of justice and examination of socio-economic structures relate to present-day conditions in Richmond, Virginia;
- Consideration of different perspectives on how to advance justice within the context of contemporary American society.

We engage these questions against a backdrop of profound crisis: long-term trends of growing wealth and income inequality; climate change and its consequences; a period of backlash against civil rights protections in many areas; and major questions about the present and future of democratic institutions in the United States.

The readings and associated material are intended to provide students with a rich theoretical lens for understanding current events; but equally important, help students develop a sense of individual and collective agency in responding to these events in constructive ways. Creative response to profound crisis, in turn, exemplifies the positive ideal of *leadership*.

Community engagement is a major part of this course. This semester, this section will partner with Overby-Sheppard Elementary School on the Northside of Richmond to provide academic and mentoring support to the school's 5th grade cohort. Once your background check is completed, Justice and Civil Society students are expected to participate in weekly shifts (approximately 90 minutes or longer) at Overby-Sheppard *every week until the last week of class*. Students are expected to approach this engagement in a spirit of respect and professionalism.

This class asks a lot of students: Academically, it involves **a lot of thoughtful reading**, a willingness to consider challenging perspectives, debate between distinct points of view, and intelligent writing. Personally, it means taking the risk of becoming invested in the serious problems of our society and taking responsibility for your own agency: as a member of this society, and as a person who by virtue of being part of this university community has privilege

relative to many or most others in our society. Interpersonally, it means being committed to listening to, respecting, learning from, and sometimes allowing yourself to be changed by the viewpoints and experiences of others (be it an author, a character in a reading, a classmate, or a community member).

You will get as much out of this course as you put into it. Because the issues being discussed are so serious—life and death, justice and injustice—my expectation is that if you are enrolled in the course, you are taking the course seriously and committing to an appropriate level of effort.

Expected Learning Outcomes

1. Students will become familiar with alternative philosophical and theoretical perspectives on social justice, including both competing definitions of social justice and competing conceptualizations about how it can be realized in practice.
2. Students will gain a deeper understanding of present-day dynamics of poverty, racial inequality, gendered inequalities and systemic inequality, as well as the linkages between these dynamics on broad historical forces such as white supremacy, capitalism, and the evolution of democracy.
3. Students will observe and consider how questions of social justice and social injustice impact specific human lives through community service in Richmond Public Schools and related reading and discussion.
4. Students will begin to consider the question of how a greater degree of justice can be achieved in challenging real-world contexts, with primary reference to the context of the present-day U.S.

Power, Equity, Identity and Culture (PEIC) Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will analyze the origins and dynamics of structural inequities and power imbalances in specific societal contexts.
2. Students will analyze how attitudes, experiences, and/or beliefs are shaped both by context and/or cultural identity.
3. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the effects of inequities and power imbalances on a society, and the historical or current efforts, successful and unsuccessful, used to reduce such effects.

II. Course Requirements

1. Attendance at every class session. No unexcused absences are acceptable. Each unexcused absence will lead to a 1% deduction from your final course grade.
2. Complete reading and come to class prepared to participate; actively participate in class. Bring your book to class. You are required to have access to a physical copy of each of the assigned texts for the duration of the semester; contact me if this requirement presents challenges. (Extra copies of some texts are available for loan.)
3. Participate with colleagues in two small group presentations focusing on chapters of assigned books (Chandler, *Free and Equal* and Chenoweth, *Districts That Succeed*) on October 29 and December 3. Specific directions will be provided.
4. Complete weekly engagement on-site at Overby-Sheppard Elementary School. You are expected to engage weekly from the completion of the background check through the last week of classes, with no missed weeks (barring illness). You will sign in at the school to document your hours.
5. Attend at least one approved community event in the City of Richmond, either through the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement or on your own. This can be a School Board or City Council meeting, a budget hearing, or other event in which matters of public concern are being discussed. (It should not be a service event.) Submit a one-page Event Reflection within 72 hours of attending the event.
6. In-class short essays, focused on Heschel, Mill, Marx, and Steinbeck, October 15, with short follow-up conversation with professor (October 15 or 16).
7. In-class essay, focused on Rawls, Chandler and Allen, November 17.
8. Final exam. Short essay or essays that will require you to engage thinkers, readings, and ideas from the entire course, December 10, 2 pm.
9. Keep a semester-long notebook concerning observations about your community engagement experiences as they relate to the course material. The notebook is to be scanned and turned in at the end of the semester and will contribute to your participation and engagement grade.
10. Write a final Reflection Paper, length 10 pages (minimum 8, maximum 12), focused on educational and economic inequalities in Richmond, drawing on class readings as well as your experience working with Overby-Sheppard students. More specific instructions for this paper will be sent approximately one month prior to the end of the course. No use of AI is permitted. The paper is due **Thursday December 17 at 5 pm.**

III. Assessment

Awarding of Credit

To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.

registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html

Components of Course Grade

In-class Essay #1	20%
In-class Essay #2	20%
Final exam	20%
Overby-Sheppard Reflection Paper	20%
In-class Participation and Engagement (including Notebook and Event Reflections): 20%	

General Grading Standards:

- A range grades are given for truly outstanding written work that not only meets the basic requirements of the given assignment but also demonstrates exceptional insight, clarity, and depth of thought. For instance, an A-range essay will not simply forward a coherent argument, but also anticipate and attempt to answer likely objections to the argument, and/or acknowledge points at which one's argument might be vulnerable. Such papers will also be very well-organized and well-written, and gracefully presented.
- B range grades are given for good and very good written work which amply meets all the basic requirements of the given assignment and reflects substantial effort and engagement with the material. Such work is generally well-written and well-organized, shows good understanding of the course material, and avoids major substantive or logical errors.
- C range grades are given for work which attempts to fulfill the requirements of the assignment but which falls short in some substantial way, with respect to organization, writing quality, understanding of the material, or argumentative logic.

Honor System

The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: "I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work."

IV. Developing Thinking, Reading and Writing Skills (Required Reading!)

The rise of AI technology raises fundamental questions about what it means to be a human being as well as the future of global society. It also raises fundamental questions about the learning process and the nature of higher education.

Whatever the ultimate answers to those questions, this course takes it as given *that is a good thing for human beings to be able to think, and think deeply, for themselves*. Being able to think deeply means developing the cognitive tools that allow one to critically assess arguments, ideologies, conclusions someone else may offer you. And it means developing the capacity to allow one to respond creatively to new situations one may encounter.

That observation leads to the following conclusion: you will not fully develop either your understanding of this material or your capacity to think about (and act upon) justice if you do not do the reading. In many cases, I will provide supplemental reading guides that I or colleagues have produced, that you can access. But they are not substitutes for wrestling with the text itself.

Reading AI-generated summaries of the assigned materials is not an acceptable way to prepare for class or to engage this material. This class isn't about providing you information to regurgitate. It's about getting you to wrestle with hard questions that often do not have easy answers, questions that have challenged both humanity's most illustrious thinkers and ordinary people for centuries, and questions that are (or ought to be) central both to how you conduct your life and to how we organized our shared life.

The issue is not whether an AI-generated summary is accurate or inaccurate. It's that relying on a summary inevitably leads one to (a) miss out on at least some details of the thought process that led the author to their conclusion (b) miss crucial nuances of the argument and (c) most importantly, miss out on the opportunity to think alongside the author, both to understand the author's arguments and to critically interrogate them. If you just settle for someone else's summary, not only will you miss (a), (b), and (c); you will also forgo entirely the possibility of (d): the possibility that *you* specifically may have something unique to add to the discussion.

I think we do you, as students, an injustice if we fail to cultivate *your* ability to move forward conversations about critical unsettled issues of fundamental human significance. This may sound grandiose, but we also do humanity as a whole an injustice by failing to cultivate that ability: your generation undoubtedly is going to have to wrestle with severe, civilization-threatening challenges that we can perhaps roughly outline but cannot fully forecast in their specifics. If the leaders (and followers) who have responsibility for actually meeting those challenges cannot think for themselves, we are right to fear the worst.

I recognize that the expectation to actually read texts goes somewhat against the grain and may be perceived as burdensome. Burdensome is not an objection, however. Learning should be, at times, burdensome. Figuring out how you want to live your life and contribute to society is often

burdensome. Actually living that life is often burdensome. And “leadership” itself is extremely burdensome.

The least you can do to prepare yourselves for potential, burdensome leadership roles is to actually read these assigned texts.

The good thing about college in a liberal arts setting is it provides you time and space to wrestle with deep, burdensome questions that may not have immediate answers. I hope you will take advantage of that space. But in case it is difficult at first, below are some tips that may help.

Learning to Read for College

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 you to 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 in the 1960s have to say that is of enduring value to *us* today? John Rawls can't answer that question—it is our job as students to answer that question ourselves.

Note: Above I have provided several strong intrinsic reasons why you should do your best to do the course reading. An additional reason is that when everyone in the class does the reading, discussions are much more engaging, interesting, and less likely to revolve excessively around the instructor or a small number of students. For that reason, there will regularly be unannounced reading accountability checks in class, taking different forms, that will impact student participation assessments.

V. Course Policies, Resources and Learning Outcomes

In-Class Guidelines

1. Arrive 5 minutes early so we can start on time. Do not pack up until the end of class.
2. Use the bathroom prior to class. Do not excuse yourself during class unless it is an emergency.
3. Beverages consumed quietly are permitted in class, food is not.
4. **Power off mobile devices PRIOR TO entering the classroom and keep them off, in your bag or backpack, during class. You will be asked to leave the classroom if you use your phone in class and be assigned an unexcused absence.** If there is an urgent reason you must be reachable by phone during a particular class, let the instructor know in advance.
5. Use of laptops in class is not permitted unless necessitated by an academic accommodation. Use a notebook to take written notes.
6. Maintain eye contact with the instructor and with other students when they are speaking. Your sole focus during class should be on what is being said in class.
7. Do not schedule other obligations (like job interviews) during class time.

Encouraging Constructive Classroom Discussion

All students are encouraged and expected to be both respectful of all other students and self-aware when engaging in classroom discussions.

Professor Peter Levine (Tufts University) helpfully provides these criteria for constructive classroom engagement in a university setting. Strive to develop these habits of positive engagement.

- Being responsive to other students. (Responsiveness needn't always be immediate, verbal, or occur within the class discussion itself.)
- Building on others' contributions and sometimes making links among different people's contributions or between what they have said and the text.
- Demonstrating genuine respect for others, where respect does not require agreement. (In fact, sometimes respect requires explicit *disagreement* because you take the other person's ideas seriously.)
- Focusing on the topic and the texts, which does not preclude drawing unexpected connections beyond them.
- Taking risks, trying out ideas that you don't necessarily endorse, and asking questions that might be perceived as naive or uninformed.
- Seeking truth or clarity or insight (instead of other objectives).
- Exercising freedom of speech along with a degree of tact and concern for other people.
- Demonstrating responsibility for the other students' learning in what you say (and occasionally by a decision not to speak).

Artificial Intelligence

Use of Artificial Intelligence software, websites, devices and so forth is strictly prohibited in work for this course. This is a blanket prohibition on use of AI in (a) undertaking any assignments for this class (b) doing the assigned reading for the course (c) preparing notes for in-class essays (d) using AI-generated summaries of assigned readings for any purpose.

You are generally not required to conduct outside research in the course beyond the assigned texts, but if you would like to undertake additional background research on some of the authors and topics we are discussing, this is permitted provided you do the assigned reading. Reading AI-generated summaries in the course of any such research is acceptable (insofar as it is practically unavoidable when using Google tools or other software platforms with embedded AI components), but again, such summaries cannot be used or referenced in completing any assignment for the course.

Students *are* encouraged to learn how to use AI appropriately as part of your overall university education. But learning norms of appropriate use is beyond the scope of this course, so students are asked and expected to follow the guidelines noted here.

Course Policy on Offensive Language

This class in its course of study addresses or references numerous difficult and painful topics, including racism, sexual violence, and oppression and violence more generally. Some assigned texts (including multimedia materials shown in class) may use or mention specific derogatory terms widely regarded as offensive, unacceptable, and inconsistent with inclusive academic learning. It will be our class policy not to repeat these terms in class verbally in our discussions; if there is need to reference these terms as part of a conversation, we will follow the convention of using the first letter of a given word to do so.

VI. Course of Study

Assigned Texts: Students are Required to Have Access to Physical Copies of These Texts for the Duration of the Course:

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*

Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Daniel Chandler, *Free and Equal*

Danielle Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy*

Karin Chenoweth, *Districts That Succeed*

Week 1. August 25 and 27

Susannah Heschel, "A Friendship in the Prophetic Tradition" (August 25)

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Chapters 1 and 2, August 27)

Week 2. September 1 and 3

RPS orientation + basic Richmond facts (September 1)

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, (Chapters 5, 7, and 9-11; September 3)

Week 3. September 8 and 10

John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty" (September 8) and "Utilitarianism" (September 10)

Week 4. September 15 and 17.

John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government" (September 15) and "The Subjection of Women" (September 17.)

Week 5. September 22 and 24.

Karl Marx. "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" (on "alienation"); "Theses on Feuerbach." (September 22.) "The Communist Manifesto." (September 24.)

Week 6. September 29 and October 1.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (pp. 1-250)

Week 7. October 6 and October 8

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath.* (pp. 251-457)

Week 8. October 15

In-Class Essay (October 15) plus follow-up interview with professor (October 15-16).

Week 9. October 20 and 22

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (excerpts to be distributed as PDF, October 20); Daniel Chandler, *Free and Equal: A Manifesto for a Just Society* (Part One, Chapters 1-3)

Week 10. October 27 and 29

Daniel Chandler, *Free and Equal* (Part Two, Chapters, 4-5, October 27); Martin O'Neill and Thad Williamson, "Beyond the Welfare State," small group presentations on Chapters 6-8 of Chandler, *Free and Equal* (October 29).

Week 11. November 3 and 5

Danielle Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy* (Chapters 1 and 2, November 3; Chapters 3 and 4, November 5)

Week 12. November 10 and 12

Danielle Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy* (Chapters 5 and 6, November 10; Chapter 7 and Epilogue, November 12)

Week 13. November 17 and November 19

In-Class Essay #2 (November 17)

Karin Chenoweth, *Districts that Succeed* (November 19), Chapter 1 and 2

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Allen, *Democracy by Means of Justice*

Week 14. December 1 and December 3.

Richmond Public Schools guest speaker to be announced (December 1)

Karin Chenoweth, *Districts that Succeed* (small group presentations on Chapters 3-6; all read Chapter 7).

Week 15. December 8

Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Christmas Sermon for Peace."

Final Exam, December 10, 2 p.m. (In-class essay integrating themes of whole class.)

Overby-Sheppard Final Paper and Notebook due December 17, 5 pm.