GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE LIBERAL STUDIES PROGRAM

SYLLABUS

American Workers and the Pursuit of Happiness

LSHV-706-01
Spring 2016
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Wednesdays, 6:30-9:30 pm
January 20–April 20, 2016
(No class on March 9)

Course Description and Learning Goals

Over the course of their history, the Americans have tended to define their identity and culture on a set of ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and consolidated in the Constitution. When the Founding Fathers promised “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the eighteenth-century Americans knew what “happiness” meant. It signified ownership of property, which gave a man (and his family) a stake in society and a voice in the government, and enabled him to rise in the world according to his talents and hard work. Thus the American Dream took shape, and aspirations for freedom and a prosperous life propelled the work ethic of American workers over the past two centuries. However today, under global capitalism with its attendant income and social disparities, the gap between the Dream and the economic realities facing workers in the United States has become dauntingly wide. In fact, the long-cherished belief that all Americans have of an equal shot at success and happiness appears to be fading.

The students will examine, through an eclectic selection of readings including Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard, Frederick Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom, Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives, and John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath, and Charlie Chaplin’s silent movie, “Modern Times,” how the American Dream has become the bedrock foundation of American culture. The students will also explore what has changed and what remains constant in the American workers’ pursuit of the American Dream from the late twentieth century onwards. Given the broad and protean nature of the course’s theme, the readings will range over many disciplines, but the conceptual framework used will be that of labor history; a care has been taken to select readings that reflect personal narratives or voices of workers with their hopes and dreams.
Required Readings

The main text will be Jim Cullen’s book, *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Changed the World*. In the interest of keeping the reading load manageable, most of the reading materials for class discussion are a single chapter or short excerpts from books.

Students will be asked to purchase the following six books (all available in paperback)


Students will be able to download excerpts from the following works available on electronic reserve at the Georgetown University Lauinger Library:


David Howard-Pitney. *Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the 1950s and 1960s. A Brief History with Documents*. (Martin Luther King, Jr. “I have a Dream,” 1963, and “Where Do We Go from Here,” 1967)

Katherine S. Newman, *Falling From Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence*. (Chapter 3, “Rejected Managers and the Culture of Meritocracy”)


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Course Requirements

A regular attendance is required and expected. Attendance at the first class meeting is mandatory, and more than one excused absence may result in the withdrawal of the student from the course.

The classes will be conducted on a seminar format focused primarily on student presentations of assigned reading materials and class discussions. Each student is expected to come to class fully prepared and contribute actively to the discussions.

Students will write a book review of Putnam’s *Our Kids OR* Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (4-5 pages), a short review of Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times,” (2-3 pages), and put together a 15-20 page research paper on the meaning of the American Dream in today’s post-recession climate of income disparities and social polarization. The book review is due on Tuesday, February 17, the film review on March 23, and the research paper should be sent to me electronically by April 29.

Grading

The grades will be based on class participation (30 percent), book review (10 percent), film review (10 percent) and research paper (50 percent).

Course Schedule, Topics and Readings

January 20  Introduction

January 27  Work Ethics during the Revolutionary Period
   Benjamin Franklin’s “Poor Richard’s Almanack, 1758”

February 3  From Farm to Textile Mills--Working Girls of New England
   “Mill and boardinghouse” from Benita Eisler (ed) *The Lowell Offerings*

February 10  Slavery and Jim Crow: Struggles for Freedom and Equality
   Frederick Douglass: *My Bondage and My Freedom*
“The King of America: the Dream of Equality” from Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream.*
Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speeches: “I have a Dream” 1963 and “Where Do We Go from Here?” 1967, David Howard-Pitney (ed). *Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s.*

February 17
Immigrant Workers and the Dream of Upward Mobility
“Sweaters of Jewtown” from Jacob A Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*
“Unwritten Laws: Work and Opportunity in the Garment Industry” From Susan Glenn’s *Daughters of the Shtetl*

February 24
Hobos—Itinerant Workers, Drifters and Dreamers
Frank Tobias Higbie. *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest 1880-1930*

March 2
The Plight of the Migrant Farm Labor during the Depression
John Steinbeck. “Harvest Gypsies”

March 16
Machine Age and Worker Alienation
Showing of Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” and class discussion.

March 23
Unionized Workers in the Industrial Heartland
Ben Hamper. *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line*

March 30
The Working Poor and Upward Mobility

April 6
The Middle Class and Downward Mobility

April 13
American Dream and Social and Economic Realities of the 21st Century
Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me.*

April 20
Student’s class evaluation and discussion of student draft research papers
Honor Code

MALs students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor; and to conduct myself honorably, as responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

Disability Statement

If you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.