Course Description and Learning Goals

The Americans 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, with the growth of the global capitalist economy and widening income disparities in the United States, the gap between the Dream and the workers’ economic realities 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 Life of Frederick Douglass, 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*. The 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 five 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:


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


**Course Requirements**

**Attendance.** 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.

**Class participation.** 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.

**Writing assignments.** Students will write a book review of Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream* (4-5 pages), a short review of Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times,” (2-3 pages), and put together a 15-20 page essay on the meaning of the American Dream in today’s post-recession world. The book review is due on Tuesday, January 29, the film review on March 26, and the final essay should be sent to me electronically by April 26.

**Foundation Course Workshop.** Finally, as part of the requirements of the MALS Foundation Courses, students are required to attend a day-long workshop designed to foster one’s research and writing skills that are central to graduate degree education. The 2014 Spring semester workshops will be held on March 1 and March 22 from 10 am to 3 pm, both in the Lauinger Library. Attendance is mandatory for those students who are taking this course to fulfill their Foundation Course requirement and who have not yet attended one of these workshops.

**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 15  
Introduction and class discussion of the salient arguments in Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream*, especially on how the understanding of the Founding Father’s promise of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” has changed with the growth of
America’s capitalist economy. (Students are asked to come to the first session having read this book.)

January 22
The American work ethics during the revolutionary period.
Benjamin Franklin’s “Poor Richard’s Almanack, 1758”

January 29
Artisans workers and republican ideals of work
“Masters and Journeymen” from Howard Rock (ed.) The New York Artisan, 1789-1825.

February 5
From Farm to Textile Mills--Working Girls of New England
“Mill and boardinghouse” from Benita Eisler (ed) The Lowell Offerings

February 12
Slavery and Jim Crow: Struggles for Freedom and Equality
Frederick Douglass: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
“King of America: The Dream of Equality” from Jim Cullen’s The American Dream

February 19
Hobos—Itinerant Workers, Drifters and Dreamers

February 26
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

March 5
The Plight of the Migrant Farm Labor during the Depression
John Steinbeck. The Grapes of Wrath, chapter 5.
John Steinbeck. “Harvest Gypsies”

March 19
Machine Age and Worker Alienation
Showing of Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” and class discussion.

March 26
Unionized Workers in the Industrial Heartland
Ben Hamper. Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line

April 2
The Working Poor and Upward Mobility
April 9  The Middle Class and Downward Mobility  Katherine S. Newman. Chapter 3, “Rejected Managers and the Culture of Meritocracy,” *Falling From Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence.*


April 23  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.