

RELS T121-F02
TR 2-3:30
Dr. Boyd Blundell
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Office: Bobet 403
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Hours: W 2-3:30
or by appointment

Social Justice and the Wire

The single most dominant theme of Catholic teaching in the last century is the problem of structural injustice. This course examines one aspect of this theme by working through David Simon's HBO series *The Wire*, acclaimed by many critics as the best show ever to appear on television. Readings from Church documents and contemporary authors will be used to help tease out key themes from the series, and the vividness *The Wire's* portrayal will be used to illustrate and breathe life into the central concerns of social justice.

Course Objectives

This course is designed to lead you to a clear understanding of the plight of what David Simon calls the "other America," and its relationship to the US Catholic Bishops' "third economy." But the objective is furthermore transformative, addressing your affective dispositions, and taking you through a process of realization and integration. You should leave the course with a functioning conceptual vocabulary that enables you to assess a given situation and formulate the appropriate questions to determine to what extent it is a product of structural injustice. You should also be able to identify with the constraint of opportunity that exists in such situations.

The use of television necessitates the understanding of video as text. The history of the question of poverty in the Catholic tradition will be covered, as will the exposure of the American mythos of individual self-reliance.

A word about television. Watching *The Wire* is meant to have some of the enjoyable aspects normally associated with watching television. However, to navigate the course successfully, you will need to be watching carefully and analytically, often with the use of pen and paper. The show was designed and should be treated as a text.

The course will generally work in a lecture+discussion format, with the ratio building toward discussion as you develop the conceptual vocabulary to discuss the issues. There will be an active service learning component in the justice system, as it is essential that the material be connected to real faces in New Orleans.

A great deal of facile uncritical reasoning about social injustice comes from the ignorance of the day-to-day plight of the "other America" or the "third economy."

The critical engagement of the text (in this case *The Wire*), is important in breaking down the underlying structural problems that constrain the imagination and behavior of the characters. There is also the intellectual work of connecting this story with the themes outlined in the church documents.

Critical thinking is instrumental for the larger goal of acting justly. There is no way to act justly in a society that has profound structural injustice if: 1) you are unaware of the suffering, 2) you do not connect the structures of the society to the suffering, 3) you are ignorant of the historical contingency of those structures, and thus the potential to alter them, and 4) you feel no solidarity with the marginalized. This course is designed to take you through that process.

Texts

(bold are primary texts)

Church Documents:

Economic Justice for All (US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996) (available online)

Rerum Novarum, "On the Condition of the Working Class (Leo XIII, 1891)

Loborem Exercens, "On Human Work," (John Paul II, 1981)

Contemporary Authors:

Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (Harper Perennial, 1992)

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New Press, 2012)

Thomas Massaro SJ, *Living Justice*, (Sheed and Ward, 2001).

Media Content

The Wire: Seasons 1-4. (available in Blackboard) Each season is 13 hours, therefore 52 hours of media viewing. The reading load is lightened because of this, as these episodes will be treated as texts.

Assignments

There will be a heavy discussion board component, encouraging you to work on your understanding together and in writing. This is essential, as uncomfortable truths are often difficult to discuss face to face. A section of the class will be responsible for posting an initial response for the weeks viewing/reading before class, and the rest of the class will continue the discussion after class time.

There will be a service learning component, working with an education system similar to one the kids from *The Wire* attend, or judicial system where the so many of the characters from *The Wire* often end up. This entails a directed journal as well.

Expectations

Being a full-time college student is a full-time job; therefore, it is expected that students approach their studies with the seriousness of a profession. On average, you should plan to spend at least 2 hours on work outside this class for every hour you're in it. The class is only as strong as the people who are there. Most of your college education comes from your peers, not your professors. This means that you have to be there, not only to learn, but also to help others learn. A liberal arts education is a team game. Thus:

Attendance is mandatory. I give out three free, no-questions-asked absences per semester. There is no such thing as an excused absence unless I get a letter from the Dean. Beyond that, absences will be reflected heavily in your grade (2-3% per absence). You are to be on time. If you arrive to class late and the door is closed, you are no longer late. You are absent. If you are absent more than 6 times, you fail the course.

You will be prepared. When you show up to my class, I expect you to be prepared. This means that not only will you have read or viewed the assigned material, you will have thought about it. If you try to get by without engaging the reading, you will not have a good time. You will have a bad time. Failure to bring the reading tells me that you are not prepared and I may well kick you out of class.

You will respect the classroom. No food (drinks are fine, coffee is encouraged). Pay attention. This is a place of learning, not a TV show where you get to tune in and out at will. If your cell-phone goes off, you will wish it hadn't; likewise for texting. You will also be civil to your peers. Some of the material will elicit strong emotions, and this is a good thing. One of the skills we will work on is thinking and expressing yourself clearly when emotions run high.

Course Requirements

Review Assignments (30%)

Service Learning (15%)

Service Learning Journal (10%)

In-Class Participation (20%)

Course Schedule

Tuesday	Thursday
8/27 Introduction	8/29 <i>The Wire</i> 1:1-2
9/3 <i>The Wire</i> 1:3-6	9/5 <i>The Wire</i> 1:7-8 (SERVE Fair)
9/10 <i>The Wire</i> 1:9-12	9/12 <i>The Wire</i> 1:13, <i>Economic Justice for All</i> (intro)
9/17 <i>Economic Justice for All</i>	9/19 <i>The Wire</i> 2:1-2
9/24 <i>The Wire</i> 2:3-6	9/26 <i>The Wire</i> 2:7-8
10/1 <i>The Wire</i> 2:9-12	10/3 <i>The New Jim Crow</i>
10/8 <i>The New Jim Crow</i>	10/10 <i>The New Jim Crow</i>
10/15 BREAK	10/17 TBA
10/22 TBA	10/24 TBA
10/29 <i>The Wire</i> 3:1-9	10/31 <i>The Wire</i> 3:10-12
9/5 <i>Savage Inequalities</i>	9/7 <i>The Wire</i> 4:1-4
9/12 <i>Savage Inequalities</i>	9/14 <i>The Wire</i> 4: 5-8
9/19 <i>Savage Inequalities</i>	9/21 <i>The Wire</i> 1:9-12
9/26 TBA	9/28 THANKSGIVING

Legal Stuff

If you have a disability and wish to receive accommodations, please contact Sarah Mead Smith, Director of Disability Services at 504- 855-2990. If you wish to receive test accommodations (e.g., extended test time), you will need to give the course instructor an official Accommodation Form from Disability Services. The Office of Disability Services is located in Marquette Hall 112.

At times, ordinary university operations are interrupted as a result of tropical storms, hurricanes, or other emergencies that require evacuation or suspension of on-campus activities. To prepare for such emergencies, all students will do the following during the first week of classes:

1. Practice signing on for each course through Blackboard.
2. Provide regular and alternative e-mail address and phone contact information to each instructor.

In the event of an interruption to our course due emergency requiring an evacuation or suspension of campus activities, students will:

3. Pack textbooks, assignments, syllabi and any other needed materials for each course and bring during an evacuation/suspension.
4. Keep up with course work during the evacuation/suspension as specified on course syllabi and on-line Blackboard courses.
5. Complete any reading and/or writing assignments given by professors before emergency began.

Assuming a power source is available....

6. Log on to university Web site within 48 hours of an evacuation/suspension.
7. Monitor the main university site (www.loyno.edu) for general information.
8. Log on to each course through Blackboard or e-mail within 48 hours of an evacuation/suspension to receive further information regarding contacting course instructors for assignments, etc.
9. Complete Blackboard and/or other online assignments posted by professors (students are required to turn in assignments on time during the evacuation/suspension period and once the university campus has reopened).
10. Contact professors during an evacuation/suspension (or as soon as classes resume on campus) to explain any emergency circumstances that may have prevented them from completing expected work.

Further information about student responsibilities in emergencies is available on the Academic Affairs web site: <http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/students-emergency-responsibilities>