

CES 440
Social Justice and American Culture
Summer 2011
M – F 1:30 – 2:45
Todd 304

John Streamas
Phone: 509-335-4791
e-mail: streamas@wsu.edu

Office: Wilson-Short 118
Office hours: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 12:00 – 1:00
and by appointment

on time (written in the late 1990s)

The new millennium is upon us, though the matter shouldn't be taken too seriously. After all, the year 2001 for Christians is 1379 for Moslems, 5114 for Mayans, and 5762 for Jews. The new millennium starts on January 1 only because one fine day the senate of imperial Rome decided to end the tradition of celebrating the new year at the beginning of spring. The number of years in the Christian era is a matter of whim as well: another fine day the pope in Rome decided to assign a date to the birth of Jesus, even though nobody knows when he was born.

Time pays no attention to the borders we erect to fool ourselves into believing we control it.

--Eduardo Galeano, *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*, p. 333

on space

The equator did not cross the middle of the world map that we studied in school. More than half a century ago, German researcher Arno Peters understood what everyone had looked at but no one had seen: the emperor of geography had no clothes.

The map they taught us gives two-thirds of the world to the North and one-third to the South. Europe is shown as larger than Latin America, even though Latin America is actually twice the size of Europe. India appears smaller than Scandinavia, even though it's three times as big. The United States and Canada fill more space on the map than Africa, when in reality they cover barely two-thirds as much territory.

The map lies. Traditional geography steals space just as the imperial economy steals wealth, official history steals memory, and formal culture steals the world.

--Galeano, p. 315

Required reading

Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002.

Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2009.

We will also read handouts and articles from the Web, and view some films. You will be responsible for keeping up with all of these.

Introduction and description

The title of this course begs the question: What is social justice? Is there a universal essence that we can call social justice? If we suggest that, for example, prohibitions against murder and incest are universal elements of social justice, how can we explain wars, acts of self-defense, and the private lives of kings and queens? If, on the other hand, definitions of social justice depend entirely on social and cultural relativism, then how can we possibly talk usefully about such injustices as racism and sexism?

What is your vision of a just world? What does it look like? Who governs it? How do its individuals and communities relate to each other? How does it define ownership—of things and of people? How does it define profit?

Given our limited time together, we will cover in detail only two topics: prisons and environmental justice. More briefly and informally, we will discuss other aspects of social justice. And your final projects may cover other topics too.

We will examine these injustices partly to identify their sources and also to inspire social justice movements. The second half of our course title appears to limit our focus to U.S. history and culture, but “America” is a multinational word and, as much recent scholarship has shown, the U.S. has been so intertwined with other nations that an understanding of “American” culture necessarily involves at least some engagement with other cultures. Among environmentalists, the injunction “Think globally, act locally” recognizes interdependencies. More relevant to our concerns this semester, what is the significance of the federal government’s allowing private companies to practice in other places techniques of torture that are outlawed within the United States? What is the significance of placing a prison for suspected terrorists in Guantánamo Bay in Cuba?

We will begin by asking basic questions. Scholar-activist Angela Davis titles a book with a simple question: *Are Prisons Obsolete?* The short, most obvious answer is: No, of course not. Why would Davis even ask such a question? But this should prompt us to investigate her motives. Why *does* she ask? And then we discover what she, and many others, identify as a “prison industrial complex” (PIC). She argues that this PIC is a profit-making enterprise, linked to an increasingly powerful police state. What, then, is a criminal? And why do some Americans fear burglars and addicts more than they fear corporate fraud and state violence? More seriously, why do prisons reflect a racialized application of justice? One of modern technology’s simplest inventions, barbed wire, has served for more than a century as the weaponized perimeter of many prisons. Originally developed as a tool for keeping out unwanted animals, barbed wire quickly became a tool for keeping in unwanted humans. Its history becomes much more problematic than we might have imagined.

Requirements

This course has no prerequisites, but it is important to bring to it an open mind and a critical consciousness. Opinions are cheap—which explains radio talk show hosts—and anyone can have them. Ideas, not opinions, are the mark of an educated person. Ideas happen when you apply critical thinking skills to a knowledge of historical and social context. Your grade will depend on the extent to which you apply critical skills to historical context—that is, on your ideas, not your opinions.

You must be willing to engage material that questions institutions and systems. You do *not* have to agree with anything you hear or read in this class, but you may not dismiss or reject without first engaging the issues and respecting views that differ from your own.

If, because of extreme financial hardship, you are unable to get the books, let me know by the third day of class, or otherwise your grade will surely suffer.

Attendance and Participation (10% of course grade)

You must attend class every day, arrive on time, leave only at the end, and participate. Anything less will result in a reduced grade. After three unexcused absences, each missed class will reduce your course grade by one-third of a letter. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class, so lateness will probably result in an absence for the day. If you come to class after the attendance sheet has circulated, you will not be allowed to sign it. *Do not schedule doctors’ appointments or assignments for other classes during our meeting time*, or else you will count as absent. Except for medical emergencies, the only legitimate absences are those that are cleared in advance, in writing.

If you are absent, you are responsible for checking on announcements made while you were away, including changes in assignments and due dates.

Come to class prepared to discuss the material. This requires more than simply reading. Think about what you read: Question and challenge it. You can participate in different ways. But you need to make your participation evident to me, so that you may receive credit for it. Participation options include e-mailing me comments or questions prior to class and keeping up with current events. Outside of class, read newspapers, or listen to broadcast news. Better yet, read alternative news sources.

Reading Journals (10%)

You will notice, in the assignment schedule below, that two Reading Journals are due. These Journals should be roughly two to three typed pages (500 to 900 words) on our discussions, readings, and films. The first Journal, due May 19, should cover all material assigned by that date. The second, due June 7, should cover all material since the first. Also, at the beginnings of some class meetings, I will ask you to jot down a question or observation and may ask you to read it to the class.

Midterm Exam (30%)

You will respond, in four to five pages, to an essay question in a take-home midterm examination, assigned May 23 and due May 26.

Final Paper (40%) and Presentation (10%)

Near the end of the term, you will submit your final paper. I encourage you to consider either of the following alternative forms for this project:

- Art (your own engagement with an issue)
- Spoken word/Performance

If you use one of these alternative forms, you will also turn in a short (three- to four-page) paper explaining your work. Why did you choose this issue/topic? Where did you find sources of information and ideas? Why did you choose this form to present your material and argument?

Otherwise your final project should be a traditional research paper of roughly eight to twelve pages—no fewer than eight. It must cite your sources in the text, and it must include a bibliography listing all sources you use. Since this is a 400-level class, you must format according to one of the traditional stylesheets: MLA, APA, Chicago, Turabian, etc.

At the end of the term, you will present your final project to the class. This presentation should take eight to ten minutes and include an identification of your topic, your approach, and your sources. The exact nature of your presentation will depend of course on your format. For example, if you create a spoken-word piece, you may perform it or share it in a handout. If you write a regular research paper, you will discuss your argument and your findings. If you show PowerPoint slides, try to use mostly images and minimize your use of text.

I envision this assignment as a six-week project. That is, you should not wait to do it till the last two days before it is due—your tardiness will show.

Final Exam

There will be no final examination in this class.

Course policies

Nothing annoys teachers more than questions asked halfway through a semester that were answered on the first day, in the syllabus. This syllabus is a map of the course. Familiarize yourself with it.

Ideally, each class meeting will be a lively, student-directed discussion of our course material. Short of that ideal, I will try to lecture as little as possible, not because lectures are boring or inefficient. In fact, good lectures often provide excellent ways of learning. Rather, I hope we will model a good community, driven by shared concerns and goals even when we disagree. To do well in this class, please note the following guidelines:

- Read the assigned material when it is due.
- Come to class on time.
- Do not read newspapers or magazines in class.
- Turn off cell phones and all electronic media devices.
- Do not use class time for sleeping or otherwise disengaging, or you will count as absent.
- Name-calling and other signs of disrespect will result in your removal from the class.
- Feel free to disagree, respectfully.
- Consider others' views. Reflect on your own social location, your privileges and power.

Learn a historically informed definition of racism, and challenge all racist discourse.
 Reflect your grasp of history by deferring to the experiences of people of color in class.
 Reflect your grasp of social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates.
 Finally, understand and consider the rage of people who are victims of systematic injustice. James Baldwin wrote that people of color have an obligation to feel rage over this nation's history of racism. If injustice does not fill you with rage, then perhaps you should ask yourself why.

Academic Integrity

See the WSU Student Handbook on Academic Dishonesty. Academic honesty is much easier to achieve than academic dishonesty, if only, whenever you use someone else's information or ideas, you cite that source. This is a legal issue, and is not negotiable. Plagiarism involves misuse of others' published or unpublished work by presenting that work, their intellectual property, as your own. Penalties range from an F on an assignment to an F for the course, even to expulsion from the university.

Students with Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit the Disability Resource Center (DRC). All accommodations MUST be approved through the DRC (Washington Building, Room 217). Please stop by or call 509-335-3417 to make an appointment with a disability specialist.

Campus Safety Plan/Emergency Information

In the interest of campus safety and emergency procedures, please become familiar with the information available on the following websites: <http://safetyplan.wsu.edu> (Campus Safety Plan), <http://oem.wsu.edu/emergencies> (Emergency management web site), <http://alert.wsu.edu> (WSU Alert site).

Assignment schedule

Note: Texts are listed below as *Reader* and Alexander. Assignments are subject to change. You are responsible for keeping up with changes.

Week 1

M, May 9: Course introduction.

T, May 10: Read *Reader* Introduction (pp 3-11) and Roundtable Discussion. Also read Alexander, Preface and Introduction.

W, May 11: Read *Reader*, chapter 1.

Th, May 12: Read *Reader*, chapter 3.

F, May 13: Read *Reader*, chapter 4.

Week 2

M, May 16: Read *Reader*, chapters 5 and 6.

T, May 17: Read *Reader*, chapter 7.

W, May 18: Read a history of barbed wire online at

<http://www.barbwiremuseum.com/barbedwirehistory.htm> and about its use today in South Africa: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/03/24/africa/saf.php>

Th, May 19: Read *Reader*, chapter 9. FIRST JOURNAL DUE.

F, May 20: No class.

Week 3

M, May 23: Read *Reader*, chapter 9. MIDTERM ASSIGNED.

T, May 24: Read *Reader*, chapter 11.
 W, May 25: Read Alexander, chapter 1.
 Th, May 26: Guest presentation TBA. MIDTERM DUE.
 F, May 27: No class.

Week 4

M, May 30: No class. Memorial Day.
 T, May 31: Read Alexander, chapters 2 and 3.
 W, June 1: Read Alexander, chapter 4.
 Th, June 2: Read Alexander, chapter 5.
 F, June 3: Reading (handout) TBA. Film TBA.

Week 5

M, June 6: Read Alexander, chapter 6.
 T, June 7: Film on Hurricane Katrina. SECOND JOURNAL DUE.
 W, June 8: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS BEGIN.
 Th, June 9: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.
 F, June 10: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.

Week 6

M, June 13: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.
 T, June 14: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.
 W, June 15: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.
 Th, June 16: FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS. FINAL PROJECTS DUE.
 F, June 17: Closing remarks and questions.

Some Web sites on globalization, the Prison Industrial Complex, immigrants' rights, and racial justice. Thanks to David Leonard for many of these. The sites are still active as of 8 May 2011.

<http://www.aclu.org/prisoners-rights>

<http://www.aclu.org/immigrants-rights>

<http://www.fntg.org/issues/issue.php?issue=6>

Resource on the politics of globalization

<http://www.prisonsucks.com>

Resource on prisons, especially strong on incarceration and racism

<http://www.innocenceproject.org/>

Web site of an organization dedicated to exonerating wrongly convicted inmates

<http://www.immigrantsolidarity.org/>

Immigrant Solidarity Network site

<http://www.afsc.org/ImmigrantsRights/>

Resources from the American Friends Service Committee (note: this is a religious group, informally called Quakers)

<http://www.nnirr.org/>

Site of the activist National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

<http://www.dreamactivist.org/>

Information on, and activism on behalf of, the DREAM Act

<http://www.campusprogress.org/issues>

The "issues" page of the Campus Progress Network site

<http://www.nwirp.org/>

Northwest Immigrant Rights Project