

## **Syllabus for Honors 131**

### **Contemporary Society in Multiple Perspectives: Wealth and Poverty Fall, 2014**

**Tuesday and Thursdays, 10:30 a.m.  
Meese Room, Mason Hall**

Professor Steven Pearlstein

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Office Hours: Mondays and Tuesdays, 3-5 PM, or by appointment

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** In this seminar we will explore wealth and poverty through the lens of different disciplines (literature, economics, politics, sociology, philosophy), different media (biography, non-fiction essays, journalism, novels, plays, movies) and the experience of different countries (England, Russia, India, the United States). How are the wealthy different from the rest of us? Why are the poor poor? How do we explain the persistence of poverty even in wealthy societies? How do the poor view the rich and the rich view the poor? What is the moral justification for great differences in wealth?

**CLASS SESSIONS.** This is a discussion seminar. What you get from it will depend in large part on your participation in the discussions. These are not meant to be discussions between professor and students. They are meant to be discussions among students, moderated by a professor. Among the “multiple perspectives” that this course seeks to explore are yours.

In order to participate in the discussion, of course, students are expected to come to each class session having read or watched the assigned material.

For each session, one of you will lead off the discussion with a 15-minute presentation on that day's reading or movie. The presentation should provide background or context that give the rest of the class a fuller appreciation of the work under discussion: historical background, biographical information on the writer or filmmaker, the public and critical reaction to the work after it was released. You are encouraged use audio-visual materials as part of your presentation. Assignments for these presentations will be made during the first class session, based as much as possible on your preferences. Students should meet with me at least ten days before their presentations to talk about the approach you intend to take and the research that will be necessary.

**PAPERS:** Your presentation will provide a foundation for a 6-8 page paper that will be due a week following the presentation. The paper should focus on one or more important and interesting insights into wealth and poverty offered by the assigned work. The essay also should incorporate your own views on the quality of the work and how effective and convincing it is. In doing so, you may want to refer to other similar works that you came across as part of your research. Papers will be graded on the basis of the quality of the research, writing and analysis. I don't just read and grade papers: I edit them, and they will need to be rewritten as many times as necessary until we are both satisfied with the result.

**GRADING/COURSE EVALUATION:**

Presentation	20 percent
Final Paper/Diary	30 percent
Class Participation	25 percent
Final Exam	25 percent

## READINGS/VIEWINGS:

The course is organized into six parts, with each part having at least one book and one movie.

A few of the books are quite long—much longer than is usual for a course at Mason (sometimes very good things comes in large packages). These longer books are intentionally spaced out throughout the semester so you have several weeks to get through each one. But you will have to plan and read in advance. **It will not be possible to read and absorb these books at the last minute.** To take some of the pressure off during the semester, I strongly recommend you read Evelyn Waugh's delightful *Brideshead Revisited* over the summer.

The works we will read and view are:

*Brideshead Revisited*, novel by Evelyn Waugh

"Remains of the Day," film by Merchant Ivory based on novel by Kazuo Ishiguro

"Gosford Park," film by Robert Altman

*Former People, Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy*, history by Douglas Smith, Parts I-IV

"The Cherry Orchard," film by Michael Cacoyannis, based on play by Anton Chekov

"Dr. Zhivago," film by David Lean based on novel by Boris Pasternak

*Andrew Carnegie*, biography by Andrew Nasaw, Chapters 1-28, 31-33, 42 (600 pages!)

"There Will Be Blood," film by Paul Thomas Anderson based on 1927 novel by Upton Sinclair

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers, Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, by Kate Boo, non-fiction narrative/journalism

"Slumdog Millionaire," film by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan

*Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America*, journalistic sketches by Barbara Ehrenreich

*Scratch Beginnings, Me, \$25 and the Search for the American Dream*, by Adam Shepard, autobiographical account  
“Grapes of Wrath,” film by John Ford based on novel by John Steinbeck  
“Food Stamp Economy,” series of six articles in Washington Post by Eli Saslow, winner of 2013 Pulitzer Prize”

*Bonfire of the Vanities*, novel by Tom Wolfe (650 pages!)  
“Wall Street,” film by Oliver Stone  
“Queen of Versailles,” documentary film by Laura Greenfield

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

Aug. 26	Introductions, Assignments, Survey
Aug. 28	Thinking About Wealth and Poverty, I
Sept. 2	Brideshead Revisited, I (Book I)
Sept. 4	Brideshead Revisited, II (Books II & III)
Sept. 9	Remains of the Day
Sept. 11	Gosford Park
Sept. 16	Former People, I (Before the Revolution)
Sept. 18	Former People, II (Revolution and After)
Sept. 23	The Cherry Orchard
Sept. 25	(No Class – Jewish Holiday)
Sept. 30	Dr. Zhivago
Oct. 2	Carnegie, I (Rags to Riches)

Oct. 7	Carnegie, II (Business Baron)
Oct. 9	Carnegie, III (Philanthropist)
Oct. 14	There Will Be Blood
Oct 16	(No Class- Columbus Day Shuffle)
Oct. 21	Behind the Beautiful Forevers
Oct. 23	Slumdog Millionaire
Oct. 28	Grapes of Wrath
Oct. 30	Nickel and Dimed
Nov. 4	Guest Speaker – Barbara Ehrenreich
Nov. 6	Scratch Beginnings
Nov 11	Food Stamp Economy
Nov. 13	Wall Street
Nov. 18	Bonfire of the Vanities, I
Nov. 20	Bonfire of the Vanities, II
Nov. 25	Queen of Versailles
Nov. 27	(No Class – Thanksgiving Break)
Dec. 2	Summing Up: Thinking About Wealth & Poverty, II
Dec. 4	Summing Up: Thinking About Wealth & Poverty, III
Dec. 11	Final Exam

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES:** All cell phones and communications devices should be shut off during class. You may bring computers to class to look things up as we are talking. If you are caught checking emails or Facebook, however, you will be asked to leave.

**COMMUNICATION:** All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard. If you cannot attend a class session, please let me know in advance.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

**ENROLLMENT:** Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. Last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Tuesday, Sept. 2. Please let me know if you drop the class before or after that date

**HONOR CODE:**

1. No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.
2. All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, no recourse is to be had to projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.