**Syllabus for Honors 131**

**Contemporary Social Issues:   
Wealth and Poverty**

**Fall, 2021**

**Tuesday and Thursdays, 10:30-11:45 a.m.**

**Horizon Hall 3001**

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Office Hours: Mon and Wed 3-4:15, Tues 1:30-3, 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, journalism, novels, plays, movies) and the experience of different countries (England, India, the United States). How are the wealthy different from the rest of us? How do they become wealthy? 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 justification for great differences in wealth? Are rich people happier? How do the answers to these questions differ by country, generation, race and gender?

**CLASS SESSIONS.** This is a discussion seminar, which may be a new experience for you. What you get from the course will depend on your own participation in the discussions and that of your fellow students. 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, students are expected to come to each class session having read or watched the assigned material and have something interesting to say about it—or an interesting question to ask about it. Be forewarned: I may ask you to share your thoughts or question with the class whether you raise your hand or not. For written works, you should also come to class with a copy in hand, or one that you can access on your computer, in case we refer to particular passages.

For each session, one of you will lead off the discussion with a 15-minute presentation on that day’s material. The presentation is meant to provide background and context—not analysis--giving the rest of the class a fuller appreciation of the work under discussion. That includes: the historical background of what was going on at the time; the cultural context in which it was written or produced; biographical information on the writer or filmmaker and the relationship of this work to his/her other work; the public and critical reaction to the work after it was released and how it is viewed today. You are encouraged to use audio-visual materials as part of your presentation, **but do not simply use slides with lots of words and bullet points**.

Assignments for these presentations will be made during the first class session, based as much as possible on your preferences. For that reason, you may want to look over the syllabus before the start of the semester to figure out which works you might want to choose. **You should meet with me at least a week before your presentation to talk over what you should include in your presentation.**

**PAPERS:** Two weeks after your presentation, you should hand in the first draft an eight-page essay about the work you chose for your presentation. **This is not meant to be a written version of your presentation, nor is it a research paper of the type you are probably accustomed to.** **It is more like a book or movie review, an analytical essay that both describes the work to someone who has not read or seen it and highlights what you consider the most important or interesting thing about it. It is based on *your* analysis, *your* opinion, *your* reading of the work.**

In writing this essay, your first and biggest challenge will be to figure out what you consider to be that most important or interesting thing. Once you think you have such a theme, you should speak to me briefly. I can help you think it through or help you avoid wasting time with a theme that is unlikely to pan out. Then, after submitting your first draft, I’ll return it with comments, suggestions and edits, either in writing or in person. You should submit your second and final draft no more than a week later, while it is all still fresh in your mind. This is a process that goes on routinely between professional writers and editors.

Papers will be graded on the basis of the quality of the thinking and the writing. By that I mean the insightfulness and originality of your analysis, the clarity and flair of your writing, your ability to simplify and summarize, your effectiveness in citing specific examples from the work to make a convincing argument, and your success in weaving all of that together into a coherent, enlightening essay. This is likely to be a challenging and even a frustrating exercise, but in the end most students find it worthwhile. A month or so into the course, I will spend an entire class helping you better understand how to go about organizing and writing such an analytical essay.

**GRADING/COURSE EVALUATION:**

Class Participation 30 percent Presentation 20 percent

Paper 30 percent

Final Exam 20 percent

**READINGS/VIEWINGS:**

There is a lot of reading in this course—more than most courses at Mason. A few of the books are quite long. These longer books are spaced out throughout the semester to give you several weeks to read each one. But you will have to plan your time carefully and begin reading these longer works well in advance. **It will not be possible to read these books at the last minute**.

The works we will read and view are arranged in pairs dealing with similar countries and topics:

*Brideshead Revisited*, novel by Evelyn Waugh (430 pages)

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

“Gosford Park,” film by Robert Altman

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, *Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, by Kate Boo, (290 pages)

“Slumdog Millionaire,” film by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan

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

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

*Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America*, journalistic sketches by Barbara Ehrenreich (256 pages)

*Scratch Beginnings, Me, $25 and the Search for the American Dream*, autobiography by Adam Shepard (220 pages)

“Do the Right Thing,” film by Spike Lee

*Warmth of Other Suns, The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration,* narrative history by Isabel Wilkerson (Part One and all chapters about Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, about 250 pages)

*Hillbilly Elegy*, autobiography by J.D. Vance (270 pages)

“Harlan County, USA”, documentary by Barbara Kopple

*Evicted, Poverty and Profit in the American City*, ethnography by Matthew Desmond (430 pages)

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

Aug. 24 **Introductions, Assignments**

Aug. 26  **Thinking About Wealth and Poverty (lecture)**

Aug. 31Gosford Park

Sept. 2 Brideshead Revisited (2 Presenters)

Sept. 7 **No Class – Jewish Holiday**

Sept. 9 Brideshead Revisited (1)

Sept. 14 Remains of the Day

Sept. 16 **No Class- Jewish Holiday**

Sept. 21 **Workshop on Essay Writing**

Sept. 23 Behind the Beautiful Forevers (1)

Sept. 28 Behind the Beautiful Forevers (1)

Sept 30 Slumdog Millionaire

Oct. 5 There Will Be Blood

Oct. 7 Carnegie / Rags to Riches (Ch. 1-29) (2 Presenters)

Oct. 12 **Columbus Day Shuffle, No Class**

Oct. 14 Carnegie / Businessman Philanthropist (1)(Ch. 30-42)

Oct. 19 Nickel and Dimed

Oct. 21 Scratch Beginnings

Oct. 26 Do the Right Thing (2 Presenters)

Oct. 28 **Workshop on Essay Writing, II**

Nov. 2 Warmth of Other Suns (2 Presenters)

Nov. 4 Warmth of Other Suns

Nov. 9 Hillbilly Elegy (2 Presenters)

Nov. 11 Hillbilly Elegy

Nov. 16 Harlan County USA

Nov. 18 Evicted (2 Presenters)

Nov. 23 Evicted

Nov. 25 **No Class – Thanksgiving**

Nov. 30 **Summing Up, Wealth & Poverty (Discussion)**

Dec. 2 **Course Evaluation**

Dec. 14 **Final Exam – Bring Blue Book or Computer**

**STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY:** If you are having trouble with the course for any reason, or you find the course unsatisfactory in any way, it is your responsibility to come and see me so we can figure out a way to fix things. I don’t bite. I don’t judge. I welcome feedback and criticism. My role is to help you succeed, but I can only do that if you let me.

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES**: All cell phones and communications devices should be shut off during class. You may bring computers to class to look things up from time to time as we are talking, but mostly they should remain closed.

**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 drop classes without penalty is Monday Sept. 7. **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, there should be no reliance on 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.