

RELS
TR 9:30-10:45
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Social Justice and *the Wire*

The single most dominant theme of Catholic teaching in the 20th 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 breathe life into the central concerns of social justice. This course will evolve as *Treme*, the quasi-sequel to *The Wire* that takes the same approach to New Orleans that *The Wire* took to Baltimore, begins filming during the semester.

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.

The 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).**

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)

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

Media Content

The Wire: Seasons 1-5. Each season is 13 hours, therefore 63 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 the judicial system where the characters from *The Wire* often end up. This entails a directed journal as well. Production of *Treme* will begin in November, there will be every effort to get the students somehow involved in that. There will be a guest lecture (possibly from David Simon) on the relationship between *The Wire* and *Treme*.

The pedagogy will be for them to begin with their raw statements of their understanding of social justice, and the take-home final will be a reevaluation of those original statements in light of what they have learned in the course. This may entail a “case analysis,” where the students are asked to evaluate it in terms of the concepts they have learned. Weekly response papers to the material viewed will also be a significant part of the grade, together with an ongoing discussion on Blackboard.

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.

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. 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 (20%)

Service Learning (15%)

Service Learning Journal (10%)

In-Class Participation (20%)

Discussion Board (15%)

Final Exam (25%)

	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>
Introduction	Sep 1	Sep 3: <i>The Wire 1:1-3</i>
Season 1: The Street	Sep 8: <i>The Wire 1:4-9</i>	Sep 10: <i>The Wire 1:10-12</i>
US Catholic Bishops	Sep 15: <i>Economic Justice for All</i>	Sep 17: <i>Economic Justice for All</i>
Season 2: The Docks	Sep 22: <i>The Wire 2:1-4</i>	Sep 24: <i>The Wire 2:5-6</i>
Season 2	Sep 29: <i>The Wire 2:6-10</i>	Oct 1: <i>The Wire 2:11-13</i>
USCCB	Oct 6: <i>Economic Justice for All</i>	Oct 8: <i>Economic Justice for All</i>
Season 3: The Politics	Oct 13: <i>The Wire 3:1-5</i>	Oct 15: <i>The Wire 3:6-7</i>
Season 3	Oct 20: FALL BREAK	Oct 22: <i>The Wire 3:8-12</i>
Kozol	Oct 27: <i>Savage Inequalities</i>	Oct 29: <i>Savage Inequalities</i>
Season 4: The Schools	Nov 3: <i>The Wire 4:1-2</i>	Nov 5: <i>The Wire 4:3-4</i>
Season 4	Nov 10: <i>The Wire 4:5-6</i>	Nov 12: <i>The Wire 4:7-8</i>
Season 4	Nov 17: <i>The Wire 4:9-10</i>	Nov 19: <i>The Wire 4:11-12</i>
	Nov 24: TBA	Nov 26: THANKSGIVING
Season 5: The Media	Dec 1: <i>The Wire 5:1-5</i>	Dec 3: <i>The Wire 5:6-8</i>
Season 5	Dec 8: <i>The Wire 5:9-10</i>	Dec 10: <i>Treme</i>