From Poor Law to Working Poor: The world of low-income America

Th. 4: 30-6 50
Professor: Lisa Dodson
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Room 408 McGuinn
Office hours: Thursday 1-4 or by arrangement.

Syllabus

From “warning off paupers” to welfare reform and, now, unsustainable wages, this course offers an overview of American attitudes and policies toward poor/low-income people and families. Readings examine the relationships between poverty and race, gender, child-raising, immigration and the expansion of a low-wage job market. We will consider past and contemporary images and language describing “the poor” and their effects on public and political debate. Throughout the term we will examine the idea of personal, social and business responsibility for the condition and future of the nation’s people. The course will encourage students to examine their own assumptions about who is poor, why they are, whether it matters and what should be done.

Your grade will be based on class participation, a paper, and work in a student-led group presentation (see last pages for details).

Course texts are in the bookstore and also may be available used, @ online bookstores:


September 4th

Every class will start with an open forum for a few minutes. This is your time to bring up anything you want from the previous class, an issue in the news, a personal experience or observation related to poverty and inequality. You are also encouraged to bring up any event, announcement or activities in which you are involved related to our topics. This is voluntary but I encourage everyone to participate.

Review Student Roster – brief introductions

Review syllabus, class participation & expectations and final paper

**Sign up for student-led discussions:**
On the first day of class we will go over the topics together and sign you all up. We need to cover ten classes so some compromise will be needed but I would like everyone to be working on a topic that interests you. Based on current registration, there will be three students per topic but some may be two people only. The last half hour of the first class you will all get together in your groups for an initial conversation.

*Note*: If any of the groups decides that they want to modify the topic or take a particular angle on it just send me an email about what you’d like to do and I will get back to you.

Introductory lecture
No Readings

*Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me*

September 11th

History of poor America: 1750-1850 - Colonial times, poor houses and slavery

- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
Trattner, Chapters 1-4

*Recommended* for those who are interested in early American poverty “policy”: *In the Shadow of the Poor House* Michael Katz (1986)

*Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me*

September 18th

History Continued: 1850-1900 - Civil War to the Progressive Era

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapter 5: The Civil War and After – Scientific Charity

**Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me**

**September 25th**
The history of childhood: Child laborer and to priceless and back again

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Zelizer, Viviana “From Useful to Useless” and “From Child Labor to Child Work” Chapters 2 and 3 in *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985) [Course Reserves]
2. Trattner, Chapter 6: Child Welfare

**Recommended** for those interested in the history of child labor reform: *Crusade for Children* Walter Trattner (1970)

**Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me**

**October 2th**
The 1935 Social Security Act: Social insurance or stifling dissent?

Documents
Mainstream analysis
Piven and Cloward reading

Find readings
**Recommended:** Lichtenstein, “That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded: Moral Economy, Slave Management and the Law” *Journal of Social History* 21(3) [Course Reserves]

**October 9th**
Family structure, marriage and single mothers: The ascension of the politics of individual responsibility and mother blame.

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion
- *For those who want it – We will save some time to discuss your papers*
Readings:
1. Coontz, Stephanie. “Leave it to Beaver” and “We Have Always Stood on Our Own Two Feet” Chapters 2 & 4 in *The Way We Never Were* (1992)
2. Williams, Lucy. “Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers” (1995)

[Course Reserves]

October 16th
Bad Girls: Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

Speakers: Autumn Green, Doctoral Student, BC Sociology Department and Patricia Quinn, Director, Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy

Autumn Green …(get Autumn’s version)
Tricia Quinn is the director of The Alliance, the foremost Massachusetts organization representing, advocating for and supporting the lives & voice of parenting and pregnant teens.

Note: There may be volunteer opportunities for interested students (this has happened in the past) with the Alliance so please feel free to ask the representative(s) about that if you are interested.

- Class should write down questions and comments for the speakers for discussion
- Discussion of readings should be integrated into your questions
- Discuss your papers

Readings:
Article about young men?

[Course Reserves]

October 23rd
Welfare Debates: “Dependency,” poor families and the rationale for welfare reform

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
Dodson, Lisa (1999) *Don’t Call Us Out of Name* Chapters 1 – 5

Mead, Lawrence (1992) “Welfare Reform” Chapter 9 in *New Politics of Poverty*

[Course Reserves]

Recommended for those interested in more detail about the welfare system:
*Unwanted Claims* by Joe Soss (2002)
Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

October 30th  Marriage as the panacea

- Coontz and Folbre paper – will make electronically available
- Pro-marriage pieces

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

November 6th  Forced to choose: The good worker or the good mother

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

November 13th  Raising Inequality

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Lareau, Annette Chapters 1, 3-5 (you can skip chapter 2) but I recommend the entire book.

November 20th  The low-wage labor market

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Shulman, Beth (2003) The Betrayal of Work: How low wage jobs fail 30 million Americans, Chapters: Chapters 2, 3

Note: Class, please Google <FESS Resources> and then go to The Self Sufficiency Standards Report for Massachusetts (FESS means Family Economic Self Sufficiency) and skim, for our discussion. If you are interested in additional estimate of a “family
budget” check out Economic Policy Institute website: Look at family budget and living wage “briefs”

December 4\textsuperscript{th}

**Proposed Speaker from 1199/SEIU in Boston.**

- Class should write down questions and comments for the speakers for discussion
- Discussion of readings should be integrated into your questions

- Course Evaluation
- Student-led discussion
- Hand in papers
- Summary lecture

**Participation and grading**

Grading is based on participation in general, term paper, and your participation on a student-led discussion.