Chicago Programs: Urban Studies Program

Human Rights and Social Justice in Chicago

Seminar Description

Introduction and Overview

Chicago is the birthplace of the school of sociology; the place where community organizing emerged as a practice and profession; where social reform led to children’s rights and social justice in many arenas. In an era where the dialogue around “sustainability” speaks to processes of human endeavor, so too does social justice speak to notions of human rights that sustain the quality of life for all, and most importantly marginalized groups.

The central question of this seminar will be to explore how Human Rights and Social Justice are fostered in the American urban context. Since the founding of Chicago in the 1800’s, the Chicago experience has been one of struggle around a number of competing interests to realize the human rights of the poor, women, people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, the disabled, and sexual minorities, etc.

Chicago has also been the center of creative reform and change; positively impacting the American social landscape. From Nobel Peace activist Jane Addams’ settlement house and juvenile justice reform movements, to the role of culture in neighborhood development and sustainability, the ingenuity of Chicago’s people made social change possible.

This seminar will look at contemporary social and human rights issues; with a special focus on how social justice strategies engage the imagination and ingenuity of marginalized groups as agents of social change.

The seminar focuses on a series of current Chicago case studies (for example: the marginalization and criminalization of youth, immigrant rights, and gender justice),
examining the intersections of race, class and culture and ways in which institutional practices shape the quality of life for these groups. A special emphasis in the seminar will illuminate the many creative strategies that communities employ to achieve justice and self-determination.

The seminar will incorporate a variety of guest speakers; field visits, selected readings, and simulated class exercises to engage students in developing an understanding of these issues, and to encourage them to see themselves as vital agents of social change.

**Objectives**

The objectives for this seminar are designed to foster an understanding of current social issues and social change strategies that are employed through public policy, advocacy, and community organizing and direct services. At the end of the seminar students will be expected to:

1. Develop an understanding of contemporary social justice issues in Chicago.
2. Consider a framework of human rights as a mechanism for connecting local social justice issues with new global realities.
3. Embrace an understanding of a variety of strategies employed by organizations in Chicago to engage human rights and social justice aims.
4. Gain new relationships with a number of organizational resources.

**Assignments**

Assignments will include a variety of experiential and academic activities (weekly journals, the individual identity project and a final group project).

**Meeting Times:** Tuesday 9:30-11:30 am; Thursday 4:00-6:00pm

**Office Hours:** Tuesday and Thursday 1:00-3:00pm; other hours by appointment
Required Resources:

Each student will receive a course reader that includes relevant readings, articles and other resources that are required for this seminar. Other materials may be added throughout the seminar, including on-line links and resources.