DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
SOCIOLOGY IN ACTION LECTURE SERIES*

Dr. Michael Gibson-Light

Punching the Jailhouse Clock
Investigating Inequality at Work in an American Prison

Proponents of penal labor frame it as rehabilitative, with prisoners acquiring marketable skills and work ethics to benefit them and the communities to which they return. Conversely, many critics frame this work as purely retributive, with detainees compelled to work for little reward under poor conditions. Dr. Michael Gibson-Light investigates these contradictory views of prisoners' work through ethnography, the scientific method of systematically observing and participating in the social world being studied. After working alongside incarcerated laborers inside a state prison for 18 months, he presents a third way of viewing penal labor, revealing that it is neither wholly rehabilitative nor wholly retributive. Instead, it is complex and competitive, with some benefiting from skilled job experiences while others become stuck completing deskilled tasks in harsh environments. In the end, the manner in which prisoners are sorted into these good or bad prison jobs reproduces inequalities amongst this already vulnerable population.

Dr. Gibson-Light is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Denver. His research has been covered by *The Guardian, Time, The Atlantic,* BBC, NPR, *USA Today, Vice,* and hundreds of other outlets internationally and has received awards from the American Sociological Association and the American Society of Criminology.

February 18, 2020

3:00 pm

Rockwell Pavilion
MD Anderson Library
Refreshments Provided

*The Sociology in Action Lecture Series hosts sociologists who have spent their careers using research to facilitate positive change in the world. For more information about the Department of Sociology visit: www.uh.edu/class/sociology.

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