

Introduction to Legal Studies

Spring 2007

Discussion Questions for Tuesday, March 27th

How does the law know?: Twelve Angry Men

The jury system is meant to guarantee justice and equality, given it is a sworn body of people who are meant to render a rational, impartial verdict or finding of fact.

The film *Twelve Angry Men* was made in 1957, at the height of the Cold War and in the wake of McCarthyism. The film illustrates some of the previously overlooked shortfalls of the jury system, and the social mechanisms through which "truth" is filtered and finally determined. The film is known for forcing viewers to reevaluate the ways each of us make judgments about others.

Discussion questions:

1. In the first minute of the film, the camera enters into the courthouse and follows a few people around. What do you notice about the way the courthouse is depicted? What do you notice about the people the camera follows? Why are we shown these people?
2. What reasons does Henry Fonda originally give for voting not guilty? Are they good reasons?
3. **(14 minutes in)** Juror 10 stands up and gives a speech about "them." "I've lived among them all my life," he says. Who is he talking about?
4. **(15 minutes in)** The jurors start giving their reasons for thinking the defendant is guilty, starting with juror 1. Which of the jurors seem to have good reasons for their judgment and which don't?
5. **(24 minutes in)** Fonda then gives a second speech about why he votes not guilty. Are his reasons different than the first time? Are they better?
6. This film is often cited as a psychological drama about peer pressure. Think about some of the key moments in the film in terms of what it says about group dynamics.
7. Think about the space of the drama – apart from the opening scene the entire film is shot in one small jury room. What is the effect, if any, of this staging?