SOCIAL INEQUALITY
Sociology 476
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Over the last part of the twentieth century, income inequality began to rise unexpectedly. Many assumptions about the nature of modern stratification were thrown into question as a result, and this fueled new research across the social sciences, particularly in economics and more recently in political science. At the same time, there was considerable but highly uneven progress in reducing gender and racial inequality, and inequality within gender and racial groups increased. These shifts have also resulted in a rethinking of stratification processes, with a new emphasis on overlapping, intersecting, and cumulative mechanisms of inequality. In order to draw on the most relevant and up-to-date research on these trends, we take an interdisciplinary approach in this class, drawing from economics, political science, education, and psychology (in addition to sociology, of course). Because of this emphasis on contemporary trends and research, our coverage of “classic texts” in social stratification will be indirect, that is, via research that builds on or challenges those texts.

Although familiarity with the most important contemporary debates in social stratification is the main objective of this course, a second important objective is to provide an integrated overview of how the various pieces of the inequality picture fit together—the individual and the institutional; the economic, social and political; the race, class and gender; the historical and contemporary. This should enable us to develop an overarching framework in which to understand social stratification in other domains that we will not have time to consider in much, if any, depth (e.g., sexuality, health, immigration, globalization).

This course has four main parts. The first provides a brief theoretical introduction to the issue of inequality and a brief introduction to historical trends in the U.S. The second part consists of three weeks on the relationship between the three main institutions of society and “inequality of outcomes”: the family, the welfare state, and the labor market and corporations. The third part consists of two weeks on “inequality of opportunity”: the role that educational institutions and social mobility play in fostering or ameliorating inequality. Finally, in the third part, we consider inequality in the political sphere: the way that Americans think about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution, and the way that political institutions shape public opinion and the extent of political voice and political representation in the United States.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This is a heavy reading course. To allow you to focus your efforts on reading, I have limited the writing requirements and emphasized reading comprehension and class participation. Thorough reading and discussion of the material for each class meeting is required and worth 20 percent of your grade. You will also be responsible for two class presentations worth 16 percent each and three short papers (5 tightly argued pages) worth 16 percent each. You may substitute one 15 page term paper due at the end of the course for the three short papers.

Each of these components will be discussed further in class, but here are some guidelines.

Class Participation: The reading for each week is focused on a single topic but each topic is large (e.g., the welfare state) and the readings consist of 6-7 separate articles or chapters from books that need to be understood on their own terms as well as synthesized with the other readings. For purposes of class discussion, the latter is more important than the former. Our emphasis will be on the big picture: major empirical trends (e.g., in earnings and income inequality over time), dominant theoretical frameworks or debates (e.g., institutional, human capital, political, etc.), and current/future research agendas (e.g., the relationship between various forms of inequality).

Class Presentation: You will work with one other person (depending on the size of the class) to introduce the week’s readings and guide discussion. The introduction should be no longer than 15 minutes and it should not summarize each reading! You should present the big picture, as described above: major empirical trends, dominant theoretical frameworks, and current/future research agendas. Introductory presentations should focus on clarifying the main arguments and/or findings of the readings as a whole, though references to particular articles are usually helpful and necessary. Other students should feel free to interrupt with clarifying questions. Criticism of the readings will take place during the discussion and not during the introduction. End the presentation with some questions to start and organize discussion.

Short Papers: There are three options here. First, you can link the various topics and sections of the course to one another: How are inequalities of outcomes related to inequalities of opportunity? How are political inequalities related to economic inequalities? How is class inequality related to family and gender inequality? And so on. Second, you can link your research interests to the readings in the class, describing how the readings inform or shape or neglect the issues that you are grappling with in your own work. Third, you can provide a critical review and analysis of a particular set of readings (in one or multiple weeks) with an emphasis on crafting an alternative or new research agenda.

REQUIRED BOOKS (in order of appearance)


REQUIRED ARTICLES/CHAPTERS

All other readings will be available either on Blackboard or from library databases.

COURSE OUTLINE

Part I: Definitions and Trends
Week 1: Defining Inequality
Week 2: U.S. Trends in Inequality

Part II: Institutions and Inequality
Week 3: Families and Inequality
Week 4: Welfare State Institutions
Week 5: Labor Market/Corporate Institutions

Part III: Inequality of Opportunities
Week 6: Education
Week 7: Social Mobility

Part IV: Politics of Inequality
Week 8: Beliefs and Preferences
Week 9: Participation and Representation

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week 1 (4/4): Defining Inequality


Week 2 (4/11): U.S. Trends in Inequality

Week 3 (4/18): Families and Inequality


Week 5 (5/2): Labor Market/Corporate Institutions

- Bernhardt et al., The Gloves Off Economy, Chapter 1.

Week 6 (5/9): Education


Week 7 (5/16): Social Mobility


Week 8 (5/23): Political Beliefs and Preferences

• Lamont, Michelle. 2000. “Assessing People Above and People Below.” Chapter 3 from The Dignity of Working Men.

Week 9 (5/30): Participation and Representation

• Gilens, Martin. 2012. Affluence and Influence, Introduction, Chapters 1, 3, 4, 8.
• Readings on Wisconsin and Occupy movements (optional).