SOCIAL INEQUALITY
SOCI 480/880
Fall (Aug 22, 2016 – Dec 16, 2016)
Tuesday, Thursday 3:30 PM – 4:45 PM
121 Burnett
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Professor: Dr. Jeffrey A. Smith
Office: 706 Oldfather Hall
Email: jsmith77@unl.edu
Office Hours: Monday 12:30-1:30 p.m. and Thursday 1:00 – 2:00 p.m. or by appointment

Course Overview

This course serves as an introduction to the field of social inequality. Inequality is one of the main lines of inquiry in sociology and is an extremely timely topic, given the current political and social climate in the United States. We will explore the basic features of inequality in the U.S. through classic and contemporary readings on class, race and gender. The readings will include theoretical work (or frameworks by which to understand/explain inequality) as well as more empirical work (where a given framework is employed to explain a phenomena of interest). The motivating questions of the class are pressing, crucial ones. Who gets what? Why do some people get more than others? Where does inequality come from? Why would we see increasing/decreasing levels of inequality? What, if anything, should be done about inequality? We will develop answers to these questions through close engagement with the readings, in-class discussion and reflective writing assignments. The first part of the class will introduce the basic concepts, problems and theories of a sociological approach to inequality (why is there inequality?). The second part of the course will focus on the allocation of resources, covering topics related to class mobility, racial hierarchies and gender (who gets what?). The last part of the course will examine the political and structural factors associated with levels of inequality (how much inequality?).

Overall, there are three main objectives:
a) become familiar with the major frameworks used to explain inequality
b) become familiar with the empirical questions explored by inequality researchers
c) gain experience applying theoretical frameworks to current debates about inequality.

Readings, Reading and the Format of the Class

This class will require each student to fully engage with the material each week. This means that you must read the assigned material. And I do mean read the material. Some of these readings will be difficult, making it tempting to skim. This is not a good idea, however, as you are trying to learn the material for the first time. It is particularly important to read the material before class as this will greatly facilitate in-class discussion. Class will consist of (some) lecture, but much of the time will be spent in discussion about the material. After an initial lecture, we will break up into small discussion groups of 3-4; after 10 minutes (or so) we will come together
again for a class-wide summary of the small-group discussions. Such a format only reaches its full potential if everyone reads the material and is ready to answer and ask questions.

My suggestion on how to read the material is to underline and take notes as you read, and then, afterwards, consider the following: a) what the authors are arguing; b) how/why they are arguing it; c) how the arguments relate to contemporary sociological research and trends in inequality.

Note that there will often be different sets of readings for each week, depending on whether you are a graduate or undergraduate student.

**Required Texts**

Most of the readings will be placed on Blackboard. There are two additional, required books for the class:


These books are available in the bookstore and can be found online at a reasonable price.

**Grading**

Note that this class is a mix of graduate and undergraduate students. My hope is that both sets of students will gain something from having the other in the class. Nonetheless, I recognize that the goals and experience of the undergraduates may be slightly different than the graduate students and have set up the grading system accordingly.

**Undergraduate**

1. Participation: 10%

Participation is a key requirement of this class. One must attend class and actively participate to earn full marks. You are expected to come to class on time and to be actively engaged. This includes paying attention, taking notes, working in groups (when prompted) and asking questions. Leaving class early will be counted the same as not attending (unless there is a valid excuse and you let me know before class that you have to leave early). Coming late will also be reflected in lower participation grades. Arriving late to class is very disruptive and is disrespectful to your fellow students.

More generally, you need to come to class prepared, interested, and ready to discuss the material at-hand. I also ask that you keep an open mind when entering the classroom. The more you are aware of your biases about the texts, the social world, etc., the better you will be able to view
such things with a critical eye. For example, you should not reject/accept an author based on purely a priori political reasons. You need to actually read what the author wrote and interpret them as a sociologist working today. Similarly, while you should feel free to critique a writer, you should do so based on what they actually wrote, not what you think they wrote.

2. Weekly Memos: 30%

You will have to write weekly memos in response to the readings assigned for that day. These weekly memos should be 1-2 pages in length, double spaced. They are due at the beginning of class. You must hand me the memos. Emailed submissions are not acceptable. The memos have two basic parts. First, you should pick one reading for the day and quickly summarize the argument. Second, you should develop a clear, well-written reaction to the article or book. Example questions you may address:

- What would you say is the most important concept(s) espoused by the writer? What is the definition they offer and do you agree with it?

- What is the main question the author is answering? Is this the ‘right’ question to be asking? Why or why not?

- Who is the author arguing against? Why do they think this other work is wrong? Who do you think is right?

- What did you find most interesting, challenging or confusing?

- What did you disagree with in the readings?

- Can you think of substantive or empirical setting where the argument of the article could be applied?

Grades will be primarily recorded as complete/incomplete but a poor effort (badly written, incoherent argument, etc.) will not receive full points. I will drop the lowest three responses, meaning you can miss three and not lose any points. Late responses will, however, be counted as incomplete. I will not accept late response papers as they are designed to facilitate in-class discussion. Accepting the papers after the class would defeat that purpose.

3. Exams: Midterm Exam 25%; Final Exam 35%

There will be two exams making up 60% of the course grade. The midterm is an in-class exam while the final (cumulative but focusing on the second half of the semester) will be a take-home exam. The midterm will be held on Tuesday, October 25th. The final exam will be passed out on the last day of class, Thursday Dec 8th, and will be due on our final exam day, Monday Dec 12th at 10:30 p.m.
Graduate

1. Participation [same as above but the expectations are higher; for example, you will be expected to lead small group discussions]: 20%

2. Weekly Memos [same as above]: 20%

3. Discussion leader for entire class: 10%

As a core requirement of the class, each graduate student will act as a discussion leader for one day during the semester. Discussion leaders will have the floor to start the class and must be prepared to talk. Students will have their day assigned soon and this cannot be changed later on in the semester (unless there are extenuating circumstances). Your responsibilities as discussion leader are to:

a) summarize the main argument of the day’s readings (with my and the classes’ help). You should be prepared to cover one of the readings (limited to a reading that everyone has read).

b) initiate the conversation by introducing a key argument/claim or question of your own. We will then open the class up to more general discussion, with you (ideally) facilitating this discussion. If things go as planned, you should be prepared to lead class for approximately 20-25 minutes.

4. Research proposal: 50%

The main assignment in the course is a research proposal. This will consist of a highly focused literature review on a topic of your choosing related to inequality. The topic must be approved by me by October 13th. You will identify the key questions and theoretical traditions that are most important for the chosen topic. You must also identify key problems and contentious issues, as well as problems that seem understudied; i.e., you should identify a problem that is important and warrants further consideration (or a ‘gap’ in the literature). This discussion must then be followed by a short discussion of a proposed research project. You should discuss the following: the question of interest, the data and methods, and the manner in which the data/methods will answer the proposed question. This should be as concrete as possible; i.e., based on available data. In general, you should identify an outstanding question and propose a study to answer it. The paper should be about 20-25 pages double-spaced, not including citations. An annotated outline for the proposal is due Nov. 15th at the beginning of class. The final proposal is due by the end of the official final exam period, Dec. 12th at 10:30 p.m.

Course Policies

Classroom Conduct
Students are expected to be engaged in the course. Out of respect for you fellow students, I ask that cell phones be turned off and that students refrain from distracting behavior (i.e. inappropriate talking or web browsing). In general the course will be much more enjoyable if everyone is considerate of the other individuals in the room. Excessive talking or distracting
behavior will not be tolerated. Students who participate in distracting behavior will receive a 0 for the day for participation, as will any student who is found texting or talking on a phone. Additionally, as this class will cover some sensitive and controversial topics (race, class, gender, etc.), I ask that you treat each other with respect. You need not agree with everything your classmates say, but you should find a way of disagreeing in a respectful manner.

*Academic Misconduct (or Don’t Cheat)*

“The maintenance of academic honesty and integrity is a vital concern of the University community. Any student found guilty of academic dishonesty shall be subject to both academic and disciplinary sanctions. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: Cheating; Fabrication or Falsification; Plagiarism; Abuse of Academic Materials; Complicity in Academic Dishonesty; Falsifying Grade Reports; Misrepresentation to Avoid Academic Work.”

Quoted from the UNL Student Code of Conduct

*Disabilities*

“It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.”

If you need accommodations it is your responsibility to discuss this with me *early* on in the semester.

*Exam and Paper Policy*

The midterm must be taken in-class on Tuesday October 25th. The final exam must be turned in by the end of the official exam period for the class, stipulated by the university (Monday Dec. 12th at 10:30 p.m.). There will be no exams accepted (or taken in the case of the midterm) after the fact unless there are extraordinary circumstances and the student has received permission from me to turn in the exam late.

*Course Schedule (subject to change)*

Part I: Introduction to the Study of Inequality: Why is there Inequality?

**Day 1 (Tuesday, Aug. 23) Introduction to the Class**

**Day 2 (Thursday Aug. 25) Setting the Stage: Background on Studying Inequality**


Graduate students also read:
Kerbo, Harold. "The History of Inequality" (on blackboard) p. 52-63
Day 3 (Tuesday Aug. 30) Setting the Stage: Background on Studying Inequality


Graduate students also read:
Kerbo, Harold. "The History of Inequality" (on blackboard) p. 63-78

Day 4 (Thursday Sep. 1) Where We are Today
*Weekly Response Due


2. Stiglitz, Joseph. “America’s 1 Percent Problem”, Chapter 1 of *The Price of Inequality* (on blackboard)

3. Smeeding, Timothy M. 2008. “Poorer by Comparison.” Chapter 17 in Inequality Reader (also on blackboard)


Day 5 (Tuesday Sep. 6) Is There a ‘Function’ of Inequality?

1. Davis, Kinglsey and Wilbert Moore. 1945. “Some Principles of Stratification.” Selections in Chapter 1 of Inequality Reader (full article on blackboard)


Graduate students must read the original text on blackboard!

Day 6 (Thursday Sep. 8) Modern Day Arguments about the Necessity of Inequality
*Weekly Response Due

1. Fischer et al., 1996. Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth. Chapter 1; Chapter 4 (on blackboard)

Day 7 (Tuesday Sep. 13) Modern Day Arguments about the Necessity of Inequality

1. Fischer et al., 1996. Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth. Chapter 5; Chapter 6 (on blackboard).

Day 8 (Thursday Sep. 15) A Marxist Approach to Inequality

*Weekly Response Due


Day 9 (Tuesday Sep. 20) A Marxist Approach to Inequality

Undergraduate students read:
1. Marx, Karl. “Classes in Capitalism and Pre-Capitalism.” Chapter 5 in Inequality Reader

Graduate students read:
   -Manifesto of the Communist Party [1848] (p 473-491)
   -Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (p 70-81)
   -Alienation and Social Classes [1845] (p 133-135)

Day 10 (Thursday Sep. 22) A Weberian Approach to Inequality

*Weekly Response Due

1. Weber, Max. Class, Status, Party. Chapter 4 of Inequality Reader

Graduate students also read:

Day 11 (Tuesday Sep. 27) A Weberian Approach to Inequality

1. Weeden, Kim A. "Why do some occupations pay more than others? Social closure and


**Day 12 (Thursday Sep. 29) Culture, Class and Inequality**
*Weekly Response Due*

1. Elliot B. Weininger. Foundations Of Pierre Bourdieu’s Class Analysis, Ch 4
   *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge University Press: 2005 (on blackboard)

   Graduate students also read:

**Day 13 (Tuesday Oct. 4) Rent-based Approaches to Inequality**

1. Sørensen, Aage. Foundations of a Rent-Based Class Analysis, Ch 5
   *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge University Press: 2005 (on blackboard)


**Day 14 (Thursday Oct. 6) Elites**
*Weekly Response Due*

   http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/class_domination.html

2. C. Wright Mills. “The Power Elite” Chapter 11 in Inequality Reader

**Day 15 (Tuesday Oct. 11) Networks and Inequality**


**Day 16 (Thursday Oct. 13) Durable Inequality**

*Weekly Response Due*

*Graduate Students: must have topic approved by me by today*


**October 18: No Class**

**Day 17 (Thursday Oct. 20) Durable Inequality**


Graduate Students are expected to read the whole thing!

**Day 18 (Tuesday Oct. 25) Catch-up and Exam Review**

**Day 19 (Thursday Oct. 27) Exam**

Part II: Who Gets What?

**Day 20 (Tuesday Nov. 1) Human, Social and Cultural Capital**


Graduate students also read:

Optional Reading:

Day 21 (Thursday Nov. 3) Mobility (or class background)
*Weekly Response Due

1. Jonsson et al. Decent Bet That Our Children Will Be Professors, Too.” Chapter 54 in Inequality Reader


Graduate students also read:

Day 22 (Tuesday Nov. 8) Racial/Ethnic Inequality


Day 23 (Thursday Nov. 10) Racial/Ethnic Inequality
*Weekly Response Due


Graduate students also read:


**Day 24 (Tuesday Nov. 15) Racial/Ethnic Inequality in a Larger Context**
*Graduate Students: annotated outline of proposal is due*


4. Western, Bruce. 2001. “Incarceration, Unemployment and Inequality.” Chapter 22 in Inequality Reader

Graduate students also read:

**Day 25 (Thursday Nov. 17) Gender Inequality**
*Weekly Response Due*


**Day 26 (Tuesday Nov. 22) Gender Inequality**


Graduate students also read:

Optional reading:

Thursday Nov. 24 No Class

Part III: How Much Inequality?

Day 27 (Tuesday Nov. 29) Structural Explanations for Rising Inequality


Graduate Students also read:


Day 28 (Thursday Dec. 1) Politics, Capital, Financial Markets and Inequality

*Weekly Response Due


Graduate students also read:

**Day 29 (Tuesday Dec. 6) Solutions to Inequality**


2. Heckman, James. “Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children” Chapter 74 in *The Inequality Reader*


**Day 30 (Thursday Dec. 8) Catch-up, Summary and Review for Exam**

Final Exam and Papers due on Dec. 12 at 10:30 p.m.