

Syllabus: Sociology 130  
**Wealth, Poverty and Inequality**  
Spring 2009

Tuesdays and Thursdays 12 to 1:15 pm  
Eaton Room 202

Professor: Betsy Leondar-Wright ([betsy@classmatters.org](mailto:betsy@classmatters.org); 781-648-0630)

Office hours: Th 1:20-2:30 and by appointment, in Room 132 (under the stairs)

Teaching Assistant: Jon Christiansen

[christiansen.jonathan@gmail.com](mailto:christiansen.jonathan@gmail.com); 857-939-1224)

**Required books available for purchase and on reserve:**

- Dollars and Sense and United for a Fair Economy, *Wealth Inequality Reader*, 2008 edition.
- Frank, Robert H., *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class*, 2007.
- McNamee, Stephen and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, 2004.
- Leondar-Wright, Betsy, *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists*, 2005.

If the cost of buying four books poses a hardship for you, please notify the professor.  
All other readings are posted on Blackboard.

One additional book is on reserve, and is recommended for optional purchase: Lardner, James and David A. Smith, editors, *Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and Its Poisonous Consequences* (2005). The unassigned (and therefore unposted) articles in this anthology include inspiring pieces by Bill Moyers, Barbara Ehrenreich, Jim Wallis and others.

**Overview:**

Over the last three decades, the gap between poor, middle-class, wealthy and super-rich people in the United States has grown dramatically. This course aims to answer several very broad questions about the extent of, harm from, multiple causes of and possible solutions to this growing economic inequality and the racial and gender inequality that is woven through it. The focus will be primarily on the United States, although students are welcome to bring global inequality into the discussions and the assignments.

One wonderful aspect of the discipline of sociology is that it spans a wide range from micro to macro, from psychology to culture to economics and policy. Only by considering all those dimensions can social reality be understood. This course will look at the causes of and solutions to poverty and excessive inequality through multiple lenses that span this whole spectrum.

The course is based on a theory of learning that emphasizes the many different aspects of human intelligence, including auditory, oral, visual, kinesthetic, analytical, interactive, and applied learning. Students will learn by reading, listening to lectures and discussions, viewing films, seeing diagrams, participating in and watching exercises, answering questions, solving problems, discussing and debating ideas, and teaching each other. The assignments and in-class activities are deliberately diverse to allow you to demonstrate your strongest mode and to strengthen your ability to learn via other modes.

## SCHEDULE OF SESSIONS

Thursday January 15 - Introduction to the course and the topic

### SECTION 1 - How much inequality is there?

Tuesday January 20 - How much wealth is concentrating at the very top?

*Watching the inauguration*

Six student presentations on inequality trends

Readings: • Sam Pizzigati, *Greed and Good*, Introduction, pp. vii-xxvii;

• *Class Matters*, pp. 1-3

Thursday January 22 - How do people survive poverty?

Seven student presentations on inequality trends

Reading: Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books*, pp. 21-37, 91-95, 151-161 (Marlon's saga)

Video excerpt: *Unnatural Causes*

Tuesday January 27 - How do low-income single mothers manage to support their kids?

Seven student presentations on inequality trends

Reading: Lisa Dodson, "Wage-Poor Mothers and Moral Economy"

### SECTION 2 - Is inequality itself harmful, or only poverty?

Thursday January 29 - Does money buy happiness?

Reading: • Frank, Introduction and Chapters 3, 4 and 5;

First student debate on solutions

Tuesday February 3 - Why do we care about rank?

Reading: • Frank, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9;

• *Class Matters*, pp. 126 -130

Video excerpt: *Unnatural Causes*

Thursday February 5 - How does inequality harm health and the economy?

Reading: • In *Wealth Inequality Reader*: Tilly pp. 137-142; Kawachi pp. 171-179

Second student debate on solutions

### SECTION 3 - Is the US a meritocracy?

Tuesday February 10 - What is the American ideal of meritocracy?

Readings: • McNamee, Chapters 1-2;

• *Class Matters* p. 4;

• *Wealth Inequality Reader*, Parrish pp. 52-57

Thursday February 12 - What impact do rich ancestors have?

Readings: • McNamee, Chapter 3;

• Larew, John, "Why are droves of unqualified, unprepared kids getting into our top colleges? Because their Dads went there"

Third student debate on solutions

Video excerpt: *Born Rich*

Tuesday February 17 - What impact does discrimination have?

- Readings: • McNamee Chapters 8 and 9;  
• Ellen Bravo pp. 69-81

Thursday February 19 - NO CLASS

#### **SECTION 4 - How have government policies widened inequality?**

Tuesday February 24 - Why do white Americans tend to have more wealth than people of color?

- Reading: *Wealth Inequality Reader*, Lui pp. 44-51

Thursday February 26 - Does public education level the playing field?

- Readings: • *Wealth Inequality Reader*, Engel pp. 92-98;  
• McNamee, chapter 5;  
• Richard D. Kahlenberg, "The Return of 'Separate But Equal'," in *Inequality Matters*.  
Video: Excerpt from *Race: The Power of an Illusion*  
Fourth student debate on solutions

Tuesday March 3 - Have tax policies redistributed money downwards or upwards?

- Readings: Two articles in *Wealth Inequality Reader*: • Krugman pp. 37-43; • Miller pp. 107-111;  
• David Cay Johnston, "The Great Tax Shift," in *Inequality Matters*

Thursday March 5 - Was the current crisis preventable?

- Reading: Photocopy to be handed out - recent analysis by Dean Baker or Bob Kuttner  
Fifth student debate on solutions

Tuesday March 10 - How can employers get away with destructive and illegal behavior?

- Readings: • Kim Bobo, "How US Labor Laws Fail Workers";  
• *Wealth Inequality Reader*, Kelly pp. 64-67;

Thursday March 12 - **MIDTERM EXAM**

**SPRING BREAK** - No class on March 17 or 19

#### **SECTION 5 - How are class inequities reproduced socially and culturally?**

Tuesday March 24 - What are cultural capital and social capital?

- Readings: • McNamee, chapter 4;  
• Swartz, pp. 75-82.  
• Two options for further understanding Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts:  
- For the brave or theoretically grounded - *Distinction*, pp. 99-112; 169-208 (skipping the charts); and  
- For newcomers to social theory -  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Bourdieu#Bourdieu.27s\\_theory\\_of\\_class\\_distinction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu#Bourdieu.27s_theory_of_class_distinction)

Thursday March 26 - How do children tend to be raised differently depending on class and race?  
Reading: Annette Lareau, "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families"  
Sixth student debate on solutions  
Video excerpt: *Born Rich*

Tuesday March 31 - How do schools receive students with different cultural capital?  
Reading: Prudence Carter, "Black Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth"

Thursday April 2 - Do tastes sort people by status in the US today?  
Readings: • David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, pp. 84-102;  
• Joanna Kadi, *Thinking Class*, pp. 93-106  
Seventh student debate on solutions

## **SECTION 6 - What happens when different classes meet?**

Tuesday April 7 - How is classism manifested?  
Reading: • Bernice Lott, "Cognitive and behavioral distancing from the poor"  
• *Class Matters*, pp. 26-63, 89-99

Thursday April 9 - How does the media represent working-class people?  
**MEET IN THE LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER**  
Video: *Class Dismissed*

Tuesday April 14 - How is college different for first-generation college students?  
Guest speaker: Susan Legere  
Reading: Alfred Lubrano, *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, chapter 3-4

Thursday April 16 - Are there class cultures?  
Readings: • *Class Matters*, pp. 16 - 25; page 124  
• Lubrano, *Limbo*, chapters 2 and 5  
Eighth student debate on solutions

Tuesday April 21 - What can go wrong in cross-class collaborations?  
Readings: *Class Matters*, pp. 66-67, 69-72, 76-78, 83-86, 100-123, and 152  
Ninth student debates on solutions

Thursday April 23 - What would a cross-class and multiracial movement for a fairer economy look like?  
Readings: *Class Matters*, pp. 10-15, 68, 73-75, 132-148  
Tenth student debates on solutions

## **Course Expectations and Grading:**

1) The readings are a very important part of the course; each one contains a unique answer to the question that frames its section. Readings are due *on the date they are listed*. Please come to class ready to discuss them. You may be called on and asked to summarize the main points of a reading whether or not you raise your hand. The midterm exam will be based on the readings; any information or idea in any reading may turn up in a multiple choice question.

2) Class participation is also important, as this course involves learning from each other. While both speaking and focused listening will be valued, either too much silence *or* too much over-participation (dominating discussions) could negatively affect your grade.

If you miss a class session, you are responsible for getting notes from a classmate. More than two unexcused absences will lower your grade by 3 points per absence. A doctor, school administrator, or other certified official must verify an absence in order for it to be excused on the basis of illness, death or hospitalization in the family or other emergency (defined as an unforeseen and unavoidable crisis). Notes from family members will not be accepted. If you have a special circumstance that makes a non-medical excused absence likely (e.g., if you are a single parent with no back-up in case of childcare cancellation; if you have a required trip for an internship), please let me know at the beginning of the semester; don't wait until you actually miss a class. Arriving more than 5 minutes late counts as an absence.

### **3) ASSIGNMENTS**

A) **Presentations.** Each student will make one brief in-class presentation to teach the class the contents of a short additional reading, **using at least one mode in addition to verbally telling information** (e.g., visual aid, hand-out, story-telling, interactive activity. If you use a Powerpoint, please bring it on a flash drive). There are two options for the timing and content of this presentation:

1) January 20, 22 and 27\*\*:

- Several students each day will teach the class a few facts about one dimension of inequality
- Approximately 3 minutes long

2) Most Thursdays from February to April, as well as Tuesday April 21:

- One pair of students each Thursday will debate a proposed solution idea or existing solution effort. One student will argue how the proposal (if enacted) or the effort (if expanded or replicated) could effectively reduce inequality and/or poverty; one student will argue for its ineffectiveness or its limitations.

-- Solution ideas (with online materials) will be suggested for each slot. However, if you want to make your presentation about another project or policy (e.g., an organization for which you have interned; pending legislation on which you have a strong opinion), that would be fine as long as you can recruit a debate partner to sign up for the other slot and argue for the other side, and as long as you write in your solution idea in the most appropriate section of the course.

-- Approximately 5 minutes for each side of the debate plus Q&A will total a 15-minute segment of the class on those days.

Sign-up for slots will start with a passed-around sign-up sheet during the first two class sessions and then continue on Blackboard. Each student should commit to a slot no later than the end of January.

**B) Reflection papers.** Three times during the semester, write a 2-page reflection paper on one chapter or article (choosing only readings with a length of 4 or more pages), handing it in before the due date for that reading. Late papers will not be accepted.

Summarize the main points briefly (in approximately one page-worth of double-spaced text) and add critical evaluation and other thoughts of your own (also approximately one page-worth). The summary and the reflections do not necessarily have to be in two sequential chunks; either sequential or interwoven is fine. Your own reflections should bring in some additional content, such as connections with another reading, relevant current events or culture, personal experience related to the content, etc., not just your emotional or analytical reactions to the reading.

Each of these reflection papers should be written about a reading in a different section of the course. (For example, you could write one during Section 2, one during Section 3, and one during Section 6.)

These are informal, journal-style papers and will be graded accordingly; it matters whether you accurately capture the author's main points, but the style and format don't matter; your additional reflections should be thoughtful and creative, but they don't need footnotes and don't need to scale great heights of brilliance and originality to get full credit.

Extra credit: Besides these 3 required reflection papers, you may write a reflection paper for any or all of the other 3 sections of the course as well. Each complete and acceptable paper will add two points to your final grade.

**C) Final paper.**

Topic: How do you think inequality and poverty could be reduced?  
Minimum 10 pages, maximum 15.

Using at least 3 course readings and other sources, analyze some cause(s) of growing inequality and poverty and prescribe solution(s). Make a case for why your solution would make a difference. Describe and evaluate at least two real-life existing or historical examples (not including anything you did an in-class debate presentation about) to illustrate and analyze your proposed solution(s). Any scale from small local projects to sweeping global systemic change is fine.

Two options for final paper:

Due March 31\*\* - Focus on government and/or other institutional policy cause(s) and solution(s).

Due April 30 - Focus on some aspect of the social and/or cultural reproduction of inequality, and how greater equality could be fostered socially and/or culturally.

**\*\* Why would anyone voluntarily choose an earlier due date than necessary?**

- The depth of analysis expected will gradually increase. Presentations and papers will be graded presuming knowledge of the course material to that point - less at the beginning, more at the end - to avoid giving an advantage to students with longer lead time to prepare.
- For the presentation, it's easier to present inequality facts than debate a solution. For the paper, it's easier to describe and argue for a policy change than for a way to reduce social and reproduction of inequality. So the difficulty of the topic gradually increases.
- Avoid having all your finals and term papers pile on you at the end of the semester - space out your workload and lower your stress!

The in-class debates, the reflection papers, and the final papers all require you to put forward opinions. Feel free to try out a stand new to you, or one you aren't sure you actually agree with. If you disagree with the professor, the teaching assistant or the author of a reading, you will not be graded more strictly for that; if you agree, you will not be graded more leniently. All positions you take will be evaluated by whether you have presented evidence and whether you make a reasoned argument.

Late papers will lose a half-step (e.g., B to B-) for each weekday after the due date, except with a valid health excuse or unforeseen family emergency verified by a note from a doctor or institutional administrator. Notes from family members will not be accepted.

### **GRADING**

Class attendance and participation	15%
In-class presentation assignment	15%
Midterm exam	20%
Final paper	35%
Reflection papers (3 papers @ 5% each)	15%
(plus 2% of extra credit for each additional paper up to 6% total)	

### **Grading Scale:**

101-106=A+	74-77= C+
94-100= A	70-73= C
90-93= A-	66-69= C-
86-89= B+	62-65= D+
82-85= B	58-61= D
78-81= B-	54-57= D-
	53-00= F

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a standard of utmost importance in this class. Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the Tufts website at:

<http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingresources/plagiarism.asp>

Outright plagiarism of a written assignment or cheating on the midterm exam will result in failing the course and notification of the dean. Lesser degrees of noncompliance with Tufts' policies on academic integrity may result in a lower grade on the assignment in question. (See <http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingresources/penalties.asp>) It is your responsibility to know the rules of citation. If you have any questions pertaining to the academic integrity guidelines, please come and talk with me.

### **Disability accommodation**

Students needing a change in the time, location and/or format of the midterm exam due to a disability should inform the professor at the beginning of the semester. For more information, please contact the Coordinator of Services for Students with Disabilities at 617-627-5571.