

PSC 324/**Inequality in American Society**

Fall Quarter, 2015

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This course examines a broad concept—"inequality"—from a variety of standpoints: definitionally, what we mean by inequality and in what ways do we consider inequality undesirable, or possibly desirable; how inequality in American society has evolved, or been transformed over time; the possible connections between inequality as a "social" phenomenon and American political processes.

An important part of this class will be the research or otherwise "creative" projects each of you will do. This will offer you the opportunity to explore features of American inequality/equality that will receive only limited direct attention in the readings and class discussions. These projects, in turn, will allow you to develop critical, research, and writing skills that will be applicable in other courses. The project options are described below.

The Book List

Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City*

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (W&P)

Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*

Darrell M. West and Burdett A. Loomis, *The Sound of Money: How Political Interests Get What They Want*

Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*

...which will be augmented by some additional shorter readings

Grading

Grades will be based on four components, each worth 25% of the total: (1) the in-class mid-term exam...essay format; (2) the research/creative project...described below; (3) the FINAL TASK—not as yet hatched by the instructor, but in all likelihood a "take home" paper assignment—based on course readings/in-class discussions; and (4) classroom participation.

The meaning of classroom participation: regular attendance plus regular contributions to the discussions of books/films. Class non-attenders will receive an F for participation, which means that their overall grade for the class will very likely not be better than C. Attenders who do not participate can expect a C for participation, which makes earning more than a B for the course unlikely. What, then, is good participation: factually knowledgeable commentary, interpretive comments that make sense given the material covered, the ability to respond in an informed way to instructor questions. Less useful participation: off-the-wall commentary that simply takes up time, rapid-fire questioning of the instructor that may not add to general class understanding of the topics at hand. **What you can**

assume: the instructor will take a generous attitude toward the vast bulk of student commentary.

The Class Calendar

September 14: Introductions/Visions of Inequality I

"My Man Godfrey," directed by Gregory La Cava

Sept. 21: Not so Simple a Topic

Four short articles/to start...

Ehrenhalt, chpts. 1-5

Sept. 28: Was There Once a Good Life?

Ehrenhalt, chpt. 6-13

W&P, chpts. 1-3

October 5: Legislating Inequality I

W&P, chpts. 4-7

Katznelson, Preface, chpts. 1-3

Oct. 12: Legislating Inequality II

Katznelson, chpts. 4-6

W&P, chpts. 8-10

Research/Creative Project Proposal Due

Oct. 19: ***(Slightly late) Mid-term exam***

Oct. 26: The Political Economy of Contemporary American Inequality

West & Loomis, entire

W&P, chpts. 11-13

November 2: Visions of Inequality II

"Bread and Roses," directed by Ken Loach

Nov. 9: Contemporary Inequality Close to Home I

Klinenberg, Prologue, Intro., chpts 1-2

Research/Creative Projects Due/at classroom, 6 PM

Nov. 16 (Final class meeting): Contemporary Inequality Close to Home II

Klinenberg, chpts. 3-5, Conclusion, Epilogue

W&P, chpts. 14-16/or, alternative “wrap-up” readings...to be discussed

Nov. 23: Final Task Due/at classroom, 6 PM

The Research/Creative Project Options

The aim of this assignment is for you to develop and execute a line of analysis dealing with the phenomenon of social inequality. There are a number of approaches you can choose to take. In each instance, a secondary aim is to enrich our in-class discussions based on the information/insights that emerge as these projects are carried out. Each member of the class will do a project based on one of the general models described below:

(1) The Interviewing Option: This project involves identifying five individuals who you will interview. The subject of the interview will be social inequality: what does it mean to them; how have they experienced it personally; do they think that inequality should be “reduced” or in some fashion ameliorated? But this is already getting ahead of things. You will determine the aim of your interviews, develop the particular questions, and choose your subjects. The product of this project will be your paper in which you analyze what your subjects have to say about inequality, and how what they have to say about this subject “squares with,” or possibly does not square with the readings and our in-class discussions.

(2) The Humanities Option: This project involves selecting some works of fiction—most likely, either a pair of novels, or two or three films—and analyze how they define inequality, how inequality is directly addressed within their narratives (for example, as a pervasive and inalterable aspect of society, or conversely, as a relationship involving oppressive intergroup relationships), and whether or not these works propose any “solutions” to the reality of social inequality. This option involves some serious thinking about the works of fiction that you will analyze. There are some fairly straightforward and workable choices. For instance, our “home” city Chicago has been the setting for much “social fiction” that seeks to describe the realities (and frequent unpleasantnesses) of urban life. Those unpleasantnesses often involve inequality. Among the authors to investigate one could include Upton Sinclair, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, or even the contemporary “detective novelist” Sara Paretsky. For best results, you will want to choose works that will allow for illuminating comparison/contrast. Again, you will write a paper analyzing the works of fiction that you have investigated.

(3) The Critical Biography Option: This project examines the writing and to some degree the career of a leading American figure whose life in some fashion or another has been associated with the issue of inequality: commenting on or agitating against inequality; advocating for equality, etc. Here are some possible subjects: Jane Addams, William Jennings Bryan, William F. Buckley, Jr., Jimmy Carter, Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, Eric Foner, George M. Fredrickson, Betty Friedan, John Kenneth Galbraith, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Kevin Phillips, Franklin D. Roosevelt. This list has been compiled with a particular concern

in mind. These are all individuals who produced extensive “writings,” either formally as articles, books, etc., or, via public speaking. As such, tracking the evolution of their views on inequality will be researchable.

Ground Rules: Each project will have two phases: (1) your preliminary exploration which will yield a short write-up of your topic and plan of work—your **proposal**—due on **October 12**, (2) an analytical paper that will be due on **November 23**. The content of the October 12 proposal will vary, depending on the option from above that you choose. If you choose the interviewing option you will want to discuss why you have chosen the group of people that you will interview, what kinds of information you want to derive from the interviews, and draft questions to be asked. For either the humanities or critical biography option, you will identify your “subject”—that is, who/what you will study, and what kinds of insights regarding inequality you expect to derive from your work. So, you will want to have begun reading/screening/researching. The final papers will run approximately 10-15 pages (of text) in length (no larger than 12-font, double-spaced, one-inch margins, hard copies only).