



SOCI 5355 Seminar in Social Inequality, Sections 1 & 2

Spring 2018

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology

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Office hours: Mon & Wed 9:30-11:00 am; noon-1:00 pm CST; available via telephone, Skype or Chat

COURSE FORMAT: Online via Blackboard

Catalog Course Description:

This course studies contemporary class, status and power hierarchies with emphasis on empirical research pertaining to placement in these hierarchies on the basis of birth-achieved statuses such as sex, race, and class origin. Consideration is also given to contemporary and classical sociological theories of social inequality. Prerequisites: Graduate standing and consent of instructor. *Credit 3.*

Course Description

Why is the United States the most unequal nation in the industrialized world? Globalization has been blamed for much of the shifts in economy of the United States, but this phenomenon has not resulted in the types of inequality in other industrialized nations that have been experienced in the United States. In fact, poverty is so extreme in the United States that the United Nations is questioning whether or not it “is it possible, in one of the world’s leading democracies, to enjoy fundamental human rights such as political participation or voting rights if you are unable to meet basic living standards” and is investigating the United States. That the wealthiest nation in the world is the most unequal country in the industrialized world has not provoked much visible outrage by the population although there is growing recognition that something is wrong. When he was still a presidential candidate, Barack Obama was roundly criticized when he voiced his observation that when Americans “get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” The criticism notwithstanding, many Americans do blame the least powerful segments in society (the poor, racial minorities, undocumented immigrants, or working women) and government (for

over-regulating businesses and imposing unnecessary and onerous policies) for their economic problems. We examine the evidence behind the ideology and its relationship to the top 1% -- the clear economic winners over the past forty years. In total, this course explores how has the richest nation in the world, the same nation that once set the global standards – in health, in education, in human rights – has come to lag the rest of the industrialized world to the point where we are now being investigated by the United Nations for human rights abuses because of the conditions in which poor Americans live. This course draws upon a broad literature including economics, history, political science and sociology to explain how this happened.

This course has six major objectives:

- (1) Overview the present levels of inequality in the United States;
- (2) Describe the policies that established broader *equality* in the United States (1930-1970s);
- (3) Understand and analyze the explanations for the new ideas and policies that emerged after the civil rights era of the 1960s which have resulted in growing inequality (post 1970s);
- (4) Understand the difficulties that individuals have with seeing inequality and recognizing the negative consequences associated with it;
- (5) Understand the mechanisms by which inequality is maintained;
- (6) Offer suggestions for addressing inequality.

By the end of the course, students should have an understanding of the mechanisms of social stratification that operate to create and maintain inequality in the United States.

Textbooks: The class incorporates literature across multiple disciplines. All readings will be provided in pdf format. However, if more detail is desired, the bibliography at the end of this document is highly recommended.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Blogging (25 points per unit - 175 points)

You will be responsible for writing a 250-300 word blog posts for each Unit. The blogs are meant to be “dialogues” between you and your classmates. Although blogs are not as formal as papers (nor as long – please keep the length to between 250-300 words) I still expect thought, reflection, proper syntax and grammar.

In these blog posts you are to respond to the reading material covered in the Unit. I would also like for you to explore and add to the material to extend and expand the discussion. You do not have to incorporate all of the unit’s material into your blog post. Instead, your blog can be based on an idea that one (or more) of the readings raised for you and for which you want to advance to your classmates.

The goal for the blog assignments are to have you actively engage and discuss topics related to inequality. I hope you blog spontaneously – meaning that as you make your way through the Unit material, make notes of the items that provoke a response (positive, negative, outrage, disagreement, etc.) and blog about it. Blogs can include (you are not limited to these):

- Something from the material that surprised you;
- Something you didn't know or realize until you read it in the material;
- Something that confirmed your suspicions;
- Something you have an example of from your personal experience;
- Something you saw on television, read in a magazine, in a newspaper that relates to the unit's readings (make sure to make the connection to the material).

Please title your blog in a descriptive manner so that the readers will know immediately what material in the Unit you are referencing. Some good academic blogs which you might model your own posts after include:

University of Chicago School of Business: <https://promarket.org>

The Conversable Economist – Tim Taylor: <http://conversableeconomist.blogspot.com>

UC Berkeley's J. Brad DeLong's Blog: <http://delong.typepad.com>

Note that the inspiration for a blog is often something the blogger has read; some data they found compelling, etc. I want you to find similar inspiration in the material and present the compelling bits to your classmates along with your elaboration.

I do not want to see everyone blogging about the same thing or same idea – if someone has already blogged an idea similar to yours, respond (by commenting) to their blog and build upon *their* blog rather than repeating the material in your own blog. I repeat, find something else to blog about.

You are required to make a least one original blog post per unit – but you may create more than one especially if the ideas that come to you cannot be merged together. Your journal grade will be based upon the accuracy of your interpretation of the material for the unit; the creativity in which you interpret and share pertinent information with your classmates; and the response from your classmates to your blog. This does not mean everyone has to agree with your blog but that generated a thought-provoking discussion.

I also expect you to respond to 3-4 of your classmates' blogs. Your comments should move beyond simply agreeing or disagreeing or saying "good job." Instead, articulate your own reaction or analysis or interpretation to their post and/or the same material. If you can not advance the material of a particular blog, then do not comment on that one. Respond to those for which you feel you can offer the most insight. That said, I hope that every blog have at least one response. If you are not getting any comments on your blog, you might consider changing something about how you are constructing it to invite more comments.

As the instructor, I will also participate by commenting in your blog but I will not address every single post. In most cases, I might share a related idea, or expand upon your blog, or tie comments

together to help deepen your learning and understanding. I will check the blogs daily during the week, and occasionally on the weekends.

I am as deadline motivated as the next person – but – this is an online course. I get particularly annoyed when someone posts (by deadline) but then never bothers to come back and read the comments the post provoked or respond until the last day of the unit when it is impossible then for others to react and respond. I expect you to check in on your blog discussions and others periodically *throughout* the time allotted for the unit and not just on the deadline days. If you see the phrase “be more present throughout the discussion” in the grading, this is what I mean. I don’t like to go Big Brother (or Sister) but keep in mind...the computer knows...Do not go MIA during the unit simply because you met the literal deadline – all of us will get more out of the online experience if you remain engaged throughout the time period for each unit.

2. 2 Thematic Summaries/Unit Analysis (2 @ 100 pts =200 points)

You will be required to prepare 2 written summaries of a Unit’s material. Think of these as mini literature reviews. The material for this course is presented over 7 units. You may pick any 2 to summarize. If you choose to (or procrastinate) summarize Unit 7 – you will have less time. I suggest selecting Units in which you have a particular interest in learning more about as the assignment asks you to introduce additional scholarly literature. Each unit summary has its own deadline. Once the deadline for the unit has passed, it is no longer an option for you to summarize.

Historically, these summaries have typically run between 5-7 pages -- double-spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins. I will provide examples of summaries students have written in my other classes to serve as a model for your own summary.

Take care to summarize and comment on the main points of the material. Make sure to reference all of the readings and material required in the Unit (supplemental Material is NOT required for your summary but can be included - you may discuss how they support and/or criticize each other). Conclude your summary with your own assessment of the Unit’s material.

When I say all of the readings – I do not mean you have to summarize the entirety of an article – every point the author(s) makes and all of the evidence marshaled. Identify a theme you are going to highlight from the readings and summarize the material around the theme. A major portion of any thesis or dissertation is the literature review section. This section is not a complete accounting of a body of literature, but selective literature depending upon your research questions. The same applies here.

I have provided you a theme you may adopt –the purpose of each unit. That is the simplest theme around which to organize your summary. However, you are not required to stick to that theme if something else comes to mind as you are reading the assigned material. I have had students who have developed their own theme.

At a minimum, the papers should include 4 parts:

1. An introductory paragraph delineating the central question of the unit and a roadmap of the

summary (what points you intend make).

2. a concise overview of the theme you identify for each article/chapter [1-2 paragraphs per reference].

3. [Optional] Additional scholarly literature that supports your theme.

4. Your own concluding thoughts regarding the Unit's material.

Things to keep in mind when preparing to write the summary:

1. What are the main ideas/points of the article?
2. What are the crucial details (or evidence) supporting the ideas/points?

If you are clear in your understanding of the articles and the evidence marshaled, writing the summary will be easier. Take your time to understand the author's argument. Revisiting the unit's blog may help you in writing these summaries. Your classmates' interpretations of the material may contribute and build upon your own understanding of the topic at hand.

Writing proficiency is a minimum requirement for satisfactory completion of this course. All written work must reflect adequate writing skills in order to receive a passing grade.

Here are some **general pointers for good writing**:

- Think your position through carefully – analyze your own ideas and beliefs about the topic
- Get clear about the points you want to make and what it is you want to conclude – i.e. be clear about your thesis
- Give reasons for your thesis and support your reasons with evidence – examples are particularly helpful in explaining a point
- Anticipate possible objections and address these, for example, address all the points that an author makes which are pertinent to the issue you want to discuss
- Revisit your thesis in a conclusion

3. Applied Sociology Paper (100 points) – Sociological Analysis of the Born Rich and Poor Kids on America Documentaries: The Social, Cultural, Financial and Human Capital of the Rich and Poor

Final paper should be between 6-8 pages, typed, double-spaced
Due: May 8th

The two videos that you will need to watch are and will serve as your data for examples are:

- (1) Born Rich -- https://youtu.be/km_JmxnzTvc
- (2) Poor Kids in America (watch the 2017 version) --
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/poor-kids/>

Collectively, describe and provide examples (note this is plural) for each of the following types of capital: finance, social, human and cultural that you see depicted in Born Rich.

Watch for education, jobs, friends, hobbies, shopping, socializing (you can also see social capital reflected in photos). Look at the environment (the houses/high rises) in which these interviewees live, the modes of transportation at their disposal, etc. Elaborate upon the habitus of the rich and how they reproduce themselves.

Describe and provide examples (note this is plural) for each of the following types of capital: finance, social, and cultural that you see depicted in Poor Kids.

The focus is on children but see what you can discern about the jobs of the parents, their education, skills, the homes in which they live, etc. What structural vulnerabilities (discussed in the text) do you see applicable to the families chronicled in Poor Kids? Does this apply to the rich? How might food and housing insecurity be harming these children?

Discuss how habitus impacts education for the rich and poor. You may choose to link this to Doob's discussion on the problems that working class and poor children face in school. Compare/contrast with the privileges of education for the rich as depicted in Born Rich.

Conclude your essay by elaborating upon the points Doob makes in "Foundations for Social Inequality (Ch. 4). Doob asks: "does the American ideology with its emphasis on individual achievement and hard work provide a realistic guideline for achieving upward mobility? (p. 87). He then highlights 4 myths regarding social mobility. Discuss the adequacy/efficacy of these ideas using the case studies provided by the 2 documentaries. In other words, is the lack of initiative or hard work on the part of the parents (in the case of Poor Kids) the reason why these children are in poverty? Does initiative and hard work explain why the children in Born Rich are rich?

Course Grade Determination

- (1) 7 Blog Discussions (25 points each - 175 points)
- (2) 2 Unit Thematic Reviews (100 points each – 200 points)
- (3) Applied Sociology Paper (100 points)

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| 427-475 | A |
| 380-426 | B |
| 332-379 | C |
| <332 | F |

Recommended Bibliography

- Baradaran, Mehrsa. 2015. *How the Other Half Banks: Exclusion, Exploitation, and the Threat to Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boushey, Heather, J. Bradford DeLong, and Marshall Steinbaum (Eds.). 2017. *After Piketty: The Agenda for Economics and Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cowen, Tyler. 2011. *The Great Stagnation: How America Ate All the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Doob, Christopher B. 2013. *Social Inequality and Social Stratification in US Society*. Pearson Education.
- Hacker, Jacob S. 2008. *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hacker, Jacob S. and Paul Pierson. 2011. *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its back on the Middle Class*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Hacker, Jacob S. and Paul Pierson. 2016. *American Amnesia: How the War on Government Led Us to Forget What Made America Prosper*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Ingham, Geoffrey (2004). *The Nature of Money*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2005. *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2014. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Massey, Douglas S. 2007. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mokyr, Joel. 2002. *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of

Harvard University Press.

Rank, Mark Robert, Thomas A. Hirschl and Kirk A. Foster. 2014. *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sjoberg, Gideon. 1999. "Some Observations on Bureaucratic Capitalism: Knowledge about What and Why?" Chapter 3 in *Sociology for the Twenty-first Century: Continuities and Cutting Edges*. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2012. *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

University Policies On...

Academic Dishonesty: All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain complete honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The University and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of academic dishonesty including, but not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work which is to be submitted, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of resource materials. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Students caught cheating will receive an F for that assignment with more severe sanctions as appropriate. <http://www.shsu.edu/dotAsset/728ecc25-f780-4dcf-932c-03d68cade002.pdf>.

Americans with Disabilities Act: It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. *Any student with a disability that affects his/her academic performance should contact the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities in the SHSU Lee Drain Annex (telephone 936-294-3512, TDD 936-294-3786) to request accommodations.*

Religious Holidays: The Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. Religious Holy Day means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation. Students should contact the instructor as soon as possible regarding any missed classes or exams due to Religious Holy Days. <http://www.shsu.edu/dotAsset/0953c7d0-7c04-4b29-a3fc-3bf0738e87d8.pdf>.

University Code of Conduct: Students are expected to assist in maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Students shall arrive to class on time and be respectful to their other students. If a student needs to arrive to class late or leave class early the student will make the professor aware of these needs prior to class time. All cell phones and beepers must be turned off and stowed

away while in the classroom. If a cell phone is out during an exam, the student will receive an F for that exam. Students who disrupt the class will be contacted by the professor to adjust their behaviors. In extreme cases students who cannot comply with these requirements can be removed and resigned from the class. <https://netreg.shsu.edu/mirror/codeofconduct.html>.

Evaluation: Students will have the opportunity to evaluate the professor during the semester.

Classroom Rules of Conduct: Students are expected to assist in maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Students shall arrive to class on time and be respectful to their other students. If a student needs to arrive to class late or leave class early the student will make the professor aware of these needs prior to class time. All cell phones and beepers must be turned off and stowed away while in the classroom. If a cell phone is out during an exam, the student will receive an F for that exam. Students who disrupt the class will be contacted by the professor to adjust their behaviors. In extreme cases students who cannot comply with these requirements can be removed and resigned from the class.

Visitors in the Classroom: Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

Student Syllabus Guidelines

- SHSU Academic Policy Manual -- Students
 - [Procedures in Cases of Academic Dishonesty #810213](#)
 - [Disabled Student Policy #811006](#)
 - [Student Absences on Religious Holy Days #861001](#)
 - [Academic Grievance Procedures for Students # 900823](#)
- SHSU Academic Policy Manual – Curriculum and Instruction
 - [Use of Telephones and Text Messagers in Academic Classrooms and Facilities #100728](#)