Overview

The ongoing coronavirus crisis and the reinvigorated social movement for racial equity have pulled back the curtain on many forms of social and economic inequality in the United States. As a subject of scientific inquiry, social inequality has a long and rich history in sociology and, in one way or another, continues to underlie most sociological inquiry. This course provides a broad approach to this core topic by examining theories and empirical contributions in the main areas of social stratification. We will discuss sociological approaches to understanding the shape, causes, and consequences of inequality in class, status, race, gender, income, wealth, and education; learn about the dynamics of inequality across time and generations; and investigate the role of neighborhoods, organizations, and institutions in shaping socio-economic inequalities. Furthermore, we will discuss concepts of equality and, throughout the course, complement our analysis of inequality with a discussion of emancipatory alternatives to current social institutions that have the potential to alleviate social inequality and increase human flourishing.
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Course Requirements

Class Participation

This seminar is discussion-based and requires your active participation in class. You will only be able to actively participate if you have completed all required readings for each week and come to class prepared to discuss them. Each week features foundational readings that will help shape your sociological thinking even where you may not yet see an immediate connection to a specific research idea or project that you are working on. During class, only active engagement with each participant’s questions or insights will provide the type of intellectual community that benefits everyone. Active engagement includes the ability to listen carefully to others’ questions and insights – otherwise, we are just talking at each other. This semester’s online format provides both challenges and opportunities for meaningful classroom discussions. We will be using breakout rooms frequently to support active and equitable participation.

Weekly Reading Interrogations & Responses

To help you fully engage with the readings you will write weekly memos. These memos are not supposed to be summaries of the readings but critical interrogations: While you may need to briefly review some of the arguments made in the readings, you should spend most of your energy on an active conversation with them, i.e. by highlighting their particular strengths or potential weaknesses, ways to expand them, how they relate to other required readings of that week or even other weeks, or simply what surprised you about them and why. In addition, I also encourage you to raise “simple” clarification questions – often, they turn out to be not simple at all but instead point towards parts of an argument that raise additional issues. These memos will be the foundation of our classroom discussions. The length of each memo should be about 2-4 paragraphs (no strict word limit/requirement, but somewhere around 500 words may be a good initial target). It is important that you submit your memo by the end of every week preceding the class (Sundays, 11.59pm) via the Canvas “Discussions” function.

To further facilitate classroom engagement, each week you are also asked to comment on at least two reading interrogations by your classmates on Mondays (starting with week 3). You will be assigned to respond to two randomly assigned reading interrogations each week, but I also encourage you to read through other reading interrogations and comment where you like. You can access others’ interrogations only once you have submitted yours. Your responses can seek to answer your classmates’ questions, amplify their observations, or pose questions to them.
Class Presentation on a Real Utopia

Most weeks offer supplementary readings containing a “real utopian” proposal. In week 2, we will discuss in details what a “real utopian” proposal is and what it accomplishes, but the general idea is that this course not merely diagnoses and critiques social inequality but also develops a vision of new emancipatory arrangements that could decrease or eliminate inequality. You are welcome, though not required, to work through these supplementary readings for any week that is of particular interest to you. However, for a week of your choice, you and one of your classmates will prepare a classroom presentation based on the supplementary readings (or, if you have a particular interest in a different utopian proposal, you may also propose alternative readings). This presentation should be around 15 minutes long and provide an overview of the “Real Utopia” and where you see its promises and challenges. To discuss your focus and division of labor, please check in with me the Tuesday before your presentation during office hours (preceding the class) or after our class ends. To support your presentation, please prepare slides as well as a 1-2 page handout. Please email them to me as separate pdfs before your presentation, labeling them “WeekX_Slides_DescriptiveTitleOfRealUtopia.pdf” and “WeekX_Handout_DescriptiveTitleOfRealUtopia.pdf”. I will upload them to Canvas before under “Files/RealUtopias”.

Faculty Interview

In place of a final paper requirement, you will conduct and record an interview with a UM professor whose work focuses on a particular aspect of social inequality. To select a fitting interview partner, you can peruse the list of faculty affiliated with the Center for Inequality Dynamics, but you also need to sign up for an office hour slot with me during September so we can discuss your own interests and potential fit. By the end of September, we will settle on the faculty member and I will confirm their availability. During October, you and one of your classmates assigned to the same professor will select 3-4 of their recent research contributions (articles, books, or other) and submit them to me for approval before you read them in depth. You will reach out to the professor and schedule a 1-hour Zoom interview with them to be conducted by mid November. You will share some of your questions with the professor via email a week before the interview. These questions can touch on particular arguments they make in the written work you have read, on their general view of a particular aspect of social inequality, and ideally also on their own vision for a more egalitarian society. You need to record the interview using Zoom’s recording functionality (please make sure you test it in advance) and you can edit the full video as needed. In addition, please also prepare a
video abstract, that is, a 2-3 minute version containing either some of the interview highlights or a particularly interesting part of the discussion. If you need technical assistance with video editing or setting up the Zoom interview, please contact Melissa Bora (syapinme@umich.edu). Upload the final full interview and the video abstract to Canvas by Dec 1, 2020, 1pm (under “Assignments/Faculty Interview” using file names “FacultyMemberLastName_FullInterview” and “FacultyMemberLastName_Abstract”). These interviews will become available to all students in this class and we also ask you and the faculty member for permission for potential future use for other activities under the umbrella of the Center for Inequality Dynamics.

Schedule

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<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Real Utopia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>09/01</td>
<td>Introduction: Do We Need Inequality?</td>
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<td>(2)</td>
<td>09/22</td>
<td>Social Class &amp; Occupations</td>
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<td>(3)</td>
<td>09/29</td>
<td>Race &amp; Ethnicity</td>
<td>Brenda</td>
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<td>(4)</td>
<td>10/06</td>
<td>Gender &amp; Intersectionality</td>
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<td>(5)</td>
<td>10/13</td>
<td>Income &amp; Wealth</td>
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<td>(6)</td>
<td>10/20</td>
<td>Top, Bottom, and Relative Deprivation</td>
<td>Mary Grace</td>
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<td>(7)</td>
<td>10/27</td>
<td>Social Mobility</td>
<td>Junchao, Tanisha</td>
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<td>11/03</td>
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<td>Demography</td>
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<td>11/17</td>
<td>Neighborhoods</td>
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<td>12/01</td>
<td>Organizations</td>
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<td>(12)</td>
<td>12/08</td>
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Grading

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<td>Class Participation</td>
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<td>Weekly Reading Interrogations &amp; Responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Presentation on Real Utopia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Interview</td>
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Reading Assignments

All required readings – both articles and page selections from books – will be available as pdf files in Canvas under “Files/Readings” (the weekly folders will be populated as we proceed through the semester). Supplementary readings on a topic of “real utopia” are marked with ◊.

Concepts of Inequality

(1) Class Overview and Introduction to Social Stratification

* No required readings

(–) Equality and Real Utopias

* Swift, Adam. 2006. Political Philosophy
* Wright, Erik. 2010. Envisioning Real Utopias

(2) Social Class and Occupations

* Wright, Erik. 2009. Understanding Class.
* Sørensen, Aage. 2000. Toward a Sounder Basis for Class Analysis.
* Real Utopia
  ◊ Wright, Erik. 2019. Socialism as Economic Democracy

(3) Race and Ethnicity

* Choose one
  ◦ Mora, Christina. 2014. Making Hispanics.
* Real Utopia

(4) Gender and Intersectionality
* Quadlin, Natasha. 2019. The Mark of a Woman’s Record.
* Combahee River Collective. 1977. The Combahee River Collective Statement
* Collins, Patricia Hill. 2015. Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Arruzza, Cinzia, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser. 2019. Feminism for the 99%

(5) Income and Wealth
* Kenworthy, Lane. 2007. Inequality and Sociology.
* Savage, Mike. 2014. Piketty’s Challenge for Sociology.
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Ackerman, Bruce et al. 2006. Redesigning Distribution.

(6) Top, Bottom, and Relative Deprivation
* Desmond, Matthew. 2016. Evicted.
* Edin, Kathryn and Luke Shaefer. 2016. $2.00 a Day.
Dynamics of Inequality

(7) Social Mobility

* Torche, Florencia. 2015. Analyses of Intergenerational Mobility.
* Hochschild, Arlie. 2016. Strangers in their Own Land.
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Swift, Adam. 2014. Would Perfect Mobility Be Perfect?

(8) Education

* Torche, Florencia. 2011. Is a College Degree Still the Great Equalizer?
* Golann, Joanne. 2015. The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School.
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Ahlberg, Jamie and Harry Brighouse. 2014. Education. Not a Real Utopian Design.

(9) Demography

* Song, Xi. 2015. Ancestry Matters.
* Bloome, Deirdre. 2014. Racial Inequality Trends and the Intergenerational Persistence of Income and Family Structure
* Hamilton, Tod. 2019. Immigration and the Remaking of Black America
Contexts of Inequality

(10) Neighborhoods

* Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2019. Race for Profit
* Owens, Ann. 2016. Inequality in Children’s Contexts
* Real Utopia
  ◦ East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (EB PREC)
    * https://ebprec.org/
    * https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8Kq1itB5qg&feature=youtu.be

(11) Organizations

* Grusky, David B. 2020. A Promising Front in the War on Inequality.
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Wright, Erik O. 2010. Envisioning Real Utopias

(12) Institutions & Policy

* Brady, David et al. 2016. How Politics and Institutions Shape Poverty and Inequality.
* Brady, David et al. 2018. Rethinking the Risk of Poverty.
* Kenworthy, Lane. 2004. Egalitarian Capitalism
* Real Utopia
  ◦ Jackson, Michelle. 2020. Manifesto for a Dream
  ◦ Kenworthy, Lane. 2020. Social Democratic Capitalism