Course Overview

This course examines class inequality in American society. It not only describes how the rich, the poor, and the middle classes live, but also how they relate to one another. Topics include the strategies used by the rich for maintaining the status quo, the hopes cherished by the middle class for improving their position, and the obstacles that keep the poor in their place. Readings will emphasize the dynamics of inequality as they intersect with class, race, and gender. This course emphasizes that class inequality does not “just happen”, but rather is a result of the way our society is structured.

As a core course in sociology this course will meet the following goals:
   a) Help students to ask, and answer "perennial questions"
   b) Incorporate cultural diversity
   c) Present a historical view of the subject
   d) Demonstrate the methodology of the discipline
   e) Include a substantial writing component
   f) Challenge students to create a personal philosophy

In this course we will study class inequality in modern American society. Because *Inequality in America* is a core course, we will consider the perennial questions of social justice and fairness that American citizens face. On the one hand, Americans strongly endorse an egalitarian rhetoric based on meritocracy. On the other, inequalities of class, race, and gender are significant dimensions of our society. In this course students will be expected to develop a personal analysis and philosophy for thinking about and responding to persistent forms of inequality. The intellectual framework for this course stresses the consequences of class inequality - that is, the inequality that arises from the fact that some (few) people privately own the productive forces of our society (factories, businesses, media, etc.) while most others must sell their labor in order to survive. Within a class framework, the roles of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender will also be considered - giving rise to an analysis that emphasizes the culturally diverse ways inequality is experienced and resisted.

To fully address inequality through these readings, we will have to consider not only what sociologists know, but also how they go about doing research - i.e. we will raise the methodological question: How do we know what we know? The readings in this course use a variety of research methods to show how the lives of the rich and the poor intertwine and shape each other.

We will begin the course with a discussion of the “American Dream” (*Meritocracy Myth*), along with an overview of social stratification and a historical analysis of rising inequality in America (*Categorically Unequal*). Following these readings, we will turn our attention to each economic class in our society: the owners and highly paid professionals, entrepreneurs, and managerial
employees (Richistan), middle-class white-collar employees (Keeping Up), the working poor (Families on the Fault Line), and the impoverished (One Nation, Underprivileged). These readings constitute a systematic comparison of various classes in American society. They also demonstrate a variety of research strategies (surveys, participant observation, interviewing, etc.) that have been particularly fruitful throughout the field of sociology.

The questions to be asked about the owners are: Who are they? What percent of the population falls in this group? How do they maintain their privileged positions? About the middle class: In what direction does their future lie? Are they becoming more like owners or more like workers? Can they maintain themselves indefinitely as a privileged stratum between owners and other workers? About workers we will ask: How do they see their own experiences? What are the achievements and discontents of their lives? Why do they accept less than their fair share of America's great wealth? How do they try to improve their situation? Finally, we will want to find out whether the unemployed live in a distinctive "culture of poverty" that keeps them from participating on equal terms in society or whether some other explanation is possible for the persistence of poverty.

Following these readings, we will conclude the course with a novel (The Tortilla Curtain) that synthesizes many of the topics and themes addressed throughout the course. This novel deals with issues of class, gender, ethnicity, as well as another source of inequality in our society: citizenship status.

**Assignments & Expectations:**

As a student in this course you are expected to attend classes regularly, be engaged, and actively participate in class. This course is designed to be discussion based, and needs your participation to be most effective. Discussions and/or lectures are essential to building understanding and will be considered required and important course materials (in other words, take good notes!). Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material for the day and make connections between the readings and any additional materials presented in class.

Every student should come prepared to each class with something to say about the topic. This could be a question, a passage you appreciated, something you found confusing, or a comment related to the material. I understand that students have many different learning styles and there are many ways to demonstrate participation. In addition to in-class participation, participation points can be earned through participation in small group discussion, or outside of class by visiting during office hours, e-mailing questions or additional thoughts after the discussion or sharing current events related to Inequality in America at the beginning of class or through e-mail for me to announce. We will begin each class with an opportunity to discuss current events that relate to Inequality in the United States.

A schedule of assignment dates is attached below. As noted, students will be required to attend classes, to participate in class discussions, and to write ten 2 page (double-spaced) papers. These papers provide an opportunity to address and respond to the assigned readings, as well as integrate your own personal experiences.
Please note that, with ten papers, this is a writing intensive course. Assignments for these papers will be distributed separately, as the course proceeds. Your final grade will be computed as follows:

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\begin{align*}
10 \text{ essays @ } 4\% \text{ each} & \quad = 40\% \\
\text{Class Participation} & \quad = 25\% \\
\text{Mid-term Paper} & \quad = 15\% \\
\text{Final Paper} & \quad = 20\%
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Any work that is not turned in on time will be penalized two points for each day past the due date it is received. Incompletes or extensions will only be granted for emergencies or under special circumstances. You must notify me before an assignment is due if you wish to ask for an extension.

**Extra Credit:**
If it is brought to my attention that there is a local event on or off campus that directly relates to issues of Inequality in America, students can receive 2 extra credit percentage points. Students must (1) attend the event, (2) discuss it in class, and (3) write a one page summary and reflection on the event. A maximum of 3 such events may be used toward extra credit for a total of 6 extra credit percentage points toward the final grade. Students must meet all 3 of the components of the task to receive full credit. Students who do not personally attend the event will not receive any extra credit.

Any events to be considered for extra credit must be brought to my attention at least one week in advance of the event in order to review and approve the event and announce the opportunity to the entire class.

**Assignment Due Dates:**
- Essay #1 – Monday, September 20th
- Essay #2 – Wednesday, September 29th
- Essay #3 – Friday, October 8th
- Essay #4 – Friday, October 18th
- Midterm Paper – Friday, October 22nd
- Essay #5 – Friday, October 29th
- Essay #6 – Friday, November 5th
- Essay #7 – Monday, November 15th
- Essay #8 – Monday, November 22th
- Essay #9 – Wednesday, December 1st
- Essay #10 – Wednesday, December 8th
- Final Paper – Friday, December 17th

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

[www.bc.edu/integrity](http://www.bc.edu/integrity)

If you have any questions pertaining to the academic integrity guidelines, please come and speak with me. If you are caught violating Boston College’s policies on academic integrity, you will
receive a failing grade for the assignment and the appropriate Dean will be notified in accordance to the rules set forth by Boston College.

Course Readings:
Books to Purchase (also available on reserve in the library):

- *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey
- *Richistan* – Robert Frank
- *Falling Behind* – Robert H. Frank
- *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian B. Rubin
- *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

Additional Readings Available on Online Course Reserves (Indicated by an asterisk)*

To Access Online Course Reserves:
Visit the Library Home Page at: [www.bc.edu/libraries](http://www.bc.edu/libraries) click “course reserves” under the section entitled “Find Library Materials” (in the top left hand corner of the page). Enter your BC user name and password. You can search for the course. The fastest ways to find all the readings is searching by the course number (SC072) or the instructor’s name (Harker, David). All books and videos used in this class are on reserve at O’Neill Library.

Course Calendar and Schedule:

**Section 1 - Overview of Social Stratification in America**

**September 8th:**
Introductions, Syllabus, Assignments, etc.
“Too Poor to Make the News” – Barbara Ehrenreich (in class)

**September 10th:**

**September 13th:**
“How Stratification Works”, Chapter 1 of *Categorically Unequal* - Douglas S. Massey

**September 15th:**
Continue with “How Stratification Works”, Chapter 1 of *Categorically Unequal* - Douglas S. Massey

**September 17th:**
“The Rise and Fall of Egalitarian Capitalism”, Chapter 2 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

**September 20th:**
*Essay #1 Due*
Continue with “The Rise and Fall of Egalitarian Capitalism”, Chapter 2 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey
Section 2 - The Power Elite: Life at the Top

September 22nd:
“The Structure of Power in American Society” – C. Wright Mills

September 24th:
Film: “People Like Us”

September 27th:
Film: “People Like Us” (continued)
“The Birth of a Nation” and “Butler Boot Camp”, Introduction and Chapter 1 of Richistan – Robert Frank

September 29th:
Essay #2 Due
“The Third Wave” and “Making It”, Chapters 2 and 3 of Richistan – Robert Frank

October 1st
“Living It” and “Losing It”, Chapters 4 and 5 of Richistan – Robert Frank

October 4th:
“Barbarians in the Ballroom” and “Size Really Does Matter”, Chapters 6 and 7 of Richistan – Robert Frank

October 6th:
“Performance Philanthropy” and “Move Over, Christian Coalition”, Chapters 8 and 9 of Richistan – Robert Frank

October 8th:
Essay #3 Due

October 11th:
No class - Holiday

Section 3 - The Middle Class: Keeping Up?

October 13th:
“Introduction”, “Recent Changes in Income and Wealth Inequality”, “Inequality, Happiness, and Health”, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Falling Behind – Robert H. Frank

October 15th:
“Envy or Context”, “The Rising Cost of Adequate”, and “Why Do We Care about Rank”, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Falling Behind – Robert H. Frank
**October 18th:**
*Essay #4 Due*
“What Types of Consumption Are Most Sensitive to Context”, “How Can Middle-Class Families Afford to Keep Up?” and “Smart for One, Dumb for All”, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of *Falling Behind* – Robert H. Frank

**October 20th:**

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**Section 4 - The Working Class: Life on the Edge**

**October 22nd:**
*Midterm Paper Due*
Film: “ Scenes from a Class Struggle in Springfield” (in class)
“Reworking the Color Line” Chapter 3 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

**October 25th:**
Continue “Reworking the Color Line” Chapter 3 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

**October 27th:**
“Introduction” and “The Invisible Americans”, Chapters 1 and 2 of *Families On the Fault Line* – Lillian Rubin

**October 29th:**
*Essay #5 Due*
“People Don’t Know Right From Wrong Anymore!”, Chapter 3 of *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian Rubin

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**November 1st:**
“Mother Goes to Work” and “The Transformation of Family Life”, Chapters 4 and 5 of *Families on the Fault Line* - Lillian Rubin

**November 3rd:**
“When You Get Laid Off, It’s Like You Lose a Part of Yourself” and “Shattered Dreams”, Chapters 6 and 7 of *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian Rubin

**November 5th:**
*Essay #6 Due*
“Past History/Present Reality”, Chapter 8 of *Families on the Fault Line* - Lillian Rubin

**November 8th:**
“Is This a White Country, or What?”, Chapter 9 of *Families on the Fault Line* - Lillian Rubin

**November 10th:**
“This Country Don’t Owe Nobody Nothing!”, Chapter 10 of *Families on the Fault Line* - Lillian Rubin
November 12th:
“Families on the Fault Line”, Chapter 11 of *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian Rubin

November 15th:
*Essay #7 Due*
“Engendering Inequality”, Chapter 6 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

Section 5 - The Poor: Poverty as a Structural Failing

November 17th:
“Below the Line”, Chapter 2 of *One Nation, Underprivileged* – Mark Robert Rank*

November 19th:
“Poverty as a Structural Failing”, Chapter 3 of *One Nation, Underprivileged* – Mark Robert Rank*

November 22nd:
*Essay #8 Due*
“Remaking the Political Economy” Chapter 5 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

November 24th and November 26th:
No class – Holiday

November 29th:
“Building a Better Underclass” Chapter 4 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

Section 6 - Conclusions: Bringing it all Together

December 1st:
*Essay #9 Due*
Pages 1-97 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

December 3rd:
Pages 98-194 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

December 6th:
Pages 195-283 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

December 8th:
*Essay #10 Due*
Pages 284-355 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

December 17th:
Final Paper Due