

Instructor: Dave Harker

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Class Meeting: Monday, Wednesday, Friday – 8:00 a.m., Gasson Hall, 301

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday – 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and by appointment – McGuinn 410A.

This course examines class inequity 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.

Core Course:

As a core course in sociology this course will meet the following goals:

- a) Help students to ask, and answer "perennial questions"
- b) Cultural diversity
- c) Present an historical view of the subject
- d) Demonstrate the methodology of the discipline
- e) 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 helped 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 an overview of social stratification and a **historical analysis** of rising inequality in America (*Categorically Unequal*). Following this reading, we will turn our attention to each economic class in our society: the owners and highly paid professionals 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.

A schedule of assignment dates is attached below. 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. **ABSOLUTELY NO LATE WORK WILL BE ACCEPTED FOR CREDIT UNLESS AN EXTENSION HAS BEEN GRANTED BY ME BEFORE THE DUE DATE OF THE ASSIGNMENT.** Please note that, with ten papers, this is a **writing intensive** course. Assignment sheets will be distributed separately. Your final grade will be computed as follows:

10 essays @ 4% each	= 40%
Class Participation	= 20%
Mid-term Paper	= 20%
Final Paper	= 20%

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

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.

Books to Purchase:

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

Assignment Due Dates:

- Essay #1 – Friday, September 18th
- Essay #2 – Monday, September 28th
- Essay #3 – Monday, October 5th
- Essay #4 – Friday, October 16th
- **Midterm Paper – Monday, October 26th**
- Essay #5 – Friday, October 30th
- Essay #6 – Friday, November 6th
- Essay #7 – Monday, November 16th
- Essay #8 – Wednesday, November 25th
- Essay #9 – Wednesday, December 2nd
- Essay #10 – Friday, December 10th
- **Final Paper – Friday, December 18th**

Course Overview (specific reading assignments will be given in class):**I. Introduction: Overview of Social Stratification in America**

Readings: Barbara Ehrenreich – “Too Poor to Make the News”
Douglas S. Massey - *Categorically Unequal*.

Assignments: September 18: Essay #1 due

September 28: Essay #2 due

II. The Power Elite: Life at the Top

Readings: Robert Frank - *Richistan*

C.W. Mills - "The Structure of Power in American Society"

Assignments: October 5: Essay #3 due

III. The Middle Class: Keeping Up?

Readings: Robert H. Frank – *Falling Behind*

Assignments: October 16: Essay #4 due

October 30: Essay #5 due

IV. The Working Class: Life on the Edge

Readings: Lillian Rubin *Families on the Fault Line*

Assignments: November 6: Essay #6 due

November 16: Essay #7 due

V. The Poor: Poverty as a Structural Failing

Readings: Mark Robert Rank – *One Nation, Underprivileged*

Assignments: November 25: Essay #8 due

December 2: Essay #9 due

VI. Conclusions: Bringing it all Together

Readings: T.C. Boyle – *The Tortilla Curtain*

Assignments: December 11: Essay #10 due