Course Description

Open most newspapers today and you will find statistics like the following: in the contemporary United States the share of wealth owned by the top 0.1% is almost the same as the bottom 90%. The six heirs to the Walmart fortune have more assets than the bottom 42% of all Americans combined. Moreover, the popular press has seen a recent spate of books on economic inequality written by economists, politicians, and public intellectuals. Many of these titles—e.g., *The Price of Inequality, Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, and *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them*—suggest that there is something morally problematic, something that ‘ought to be done,’ about a society in which certain individuals own so much more than others. But is inequality problematic, and, if so, why? And if too much inequality is morally bad, what vision of equality ought we to strive for?

In answering these questions, we will investigate: 1. John Rawls’s “Difference Principle,” which is the demanding criterion that a just society redistribute wealth so as to promote the well-being of the worst off; 2. Luck Egalitarianism, which is the view that unjust inequalities are those that stem from undeserved bad luck but not from our own bad choices; and 3. interrogations of gender and race-based inequalities. We will also consider 4. two critics of economic egalitarianism. The first maintains that it is not inequality per se that ought to worry us, but rather absolute levels of deprivation. It does not matter that some have more than others, just as long as everyone has enough (Frankfurt). The second maintains that state focus on economic redistribution violates the liberty of citizens (Nozick).

Required Texts


Other readings will be made available via Moodle or email. Please make sure that you bring hard copies of the readings to class.
Requirements

1. Academic Honesty

Please read the Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, as well as the other information contained in ‘Academic Honesty and Plagiarism’ on the Dean of Students website <www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty>. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic honesty or dishonesty, come speak to me about them.

2. Deadlines

If you find that you are unable to complete an assignment by the deadline because of a crisis or emergency, do contact me and let me know what is going on. Contact me on or before the deadline, for, once the deadline has passed, there is much less I can do to help. Do not assume, without contacting me, that you may turn an assignment in late.

Papers that are submitted late and without an extension will be marked down .3 down (see #7 for grading scale) for every day of lateness.

Weekly discussion papers will be collected at the end of each class.

3. Reading

Each Friday you will be emailed a short response assignment based on the reading for the following Wednesday. Your response should be 1-1.5 pages, double-spaced, 12 pt. font. Please print it out and bring it to class.

These assignments will be graded on a √+, √, and √- basis, with a √+ being logged as a 10, a √ as an 8, and a √- as a 6 (see #7 on grading). A √+ indicates your having put serious effort into engaging with the text and organizing your response in a clear manner. The responses will figure in your class participation grade.

4. Attendance

You should attend class regularly, on-time, and well-rested. If you should miss a class because of illness or family emergency, or some other pressing matter, please let me know ahead of time by email.

Attendance/participation will count for 25% of your grade. You may miss up to 1 class session without a legitimate excuse. There will be a .2 reduction in your overall participation grade for each subsequent day missed without a medical excuse.

If you need to miss a class because of an athletic event, please have your coach write to me beforehand

5. Participation

Your participation grade turns on the quality, not the quantity of your contributions, and the extent to which you exhibit the respect and care necessary to promote good discussion. Contributions do not have to be in the form of “answers” or completed “theories” about a text or position—thoughtful questions are highly encouraged, and you will certainly not be penalized for a spirit of humility. While good contributions obviously vary immensely, I especially value comments and
questions that pay close attention to the relevant text and those that build on, and reflect attention to, others’ contributions.

Office hours: I will hold regular office hours from 3-420pm on Tuesdays and 10-1120am on Wednesdays. On Monday of each week I will post a sign-up sheet for those times blocked off in 20-minute slots. If you cannot make my posted office hours or if they are full, email me to schedule another meeting time.

6. Writing
In addition to weekly 1-1.5 page short assignments this seminar will require a 5-7 page midterm essay and a 10-12 page final essay on a topic to be developed in consultation with me no later than week 12 (11/28-11/29).

7. Grading
Attendance/participation/reading responses (12 1-page responses) 25%
Midterm essay (5-7 pages) 25%
Final Essay (10-12 pages) 50%

You will have the option of rewriting the midterm essay. If you do so, your grade for that paper will be an average of the grades that you receive on the original and rewrite.

You will be given both a number grade and a letter grade for each paper. Only the numerical grade is taken into account in determining your final grade. Numerical grades correspond to letter grades as follows: A 10-9.5; A- 9.4-9.0; B+ 8.9-8.7; B 8.6-8.3; B- 8.2-8.0; C 7.9 or below

8. Electronic Devices in the Class
All devices with an ON/OFF switch—laptops, phones, etc.—must be switched off during class, unless they are serving a medical purpose. All forms of electronic social commerce (e.g., texting, internet-surfing, emailing, and gaming) are strictly forbidden.

9. Disability Statement
This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Charri Boykin-East, Senior Associate Dean of Students, at cjboykineast@amherst.edu or in Converse Hall 105. Only those students with a documented disability can arrange for accommodations, and it is the student’s responsibility to inform the professor of those accommodations once Dean Boykin-East has documented a disability. For more info, see: www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/disability.

Reading Schedule

Note: This schedule is entirely provisional. We may speed up, slow down, skip readings, or add readings, depending on where our discussion leads and the interests of members of the class.
Week 1: What’s Wrong with Inequality?

(9/7) General Introduction; T.M. Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality” (pp. 202-207)

Week 2: Justice as Fairness

(W, 9/14) John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, Chapter 1, sections 1-6, 9. Pp. 3-33; 46-53

Week 3: The Difference Principle


Week 4: The Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance


Week 5: Liberty vs. Egalitarianism

(W, 10/5) Robert Nozick, selections from Anarchy, State, Utopia

Midterm essay assigned

(W, 10/12) No class: Mid Semester Break

Week 6: Inequality and the Global Poor

(M, 10/17) Mandatory screening of Nero’s Guests (Dir. Deepa Bhatia) (time tbd)

(W, 10/19) Guest lecture: P. Sainath. Readings: Thomas Pogge, “‘Assisting’ the Global Poor” and Neera Chandhoke, "How Much is Enough, Mr. Thomas? How Much Will Ever Be Enough?"

(W, 10/19) Mandatory public lecture (5pm): P. Sainath, “Inequality and the Rise of Rural Distress”

(F, 10/21) Midterm essay due

Week 7: Inequality, Gender, and the Family

(W, 10/26) Eva Feder Kittay, “Political Liberalism and Human Dependency”

Week 8: Racial Inequality and Reparations


(Th, 11/3/Fri, 11/4): Charles Mill’s lectures at University of Massachusetts Amherst (must attend 1)
Week 9: Economic Inequality and Personal Behavior

Week 10 ‘Luck Egalitarianism’
(W, 11/23) No class: Thanksgiving Break

Week 11 ‘Luck Egalitarianism’ continued
(M/Tu, 11/28-11/29) Meetings to approve seminar paper topic

Week 12 The Critique of ‘Luck Egalitarianism’
(W, 12/7) Elizabeth Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?”

Week 13 Against Egalitarianism
(W, 12/14) Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”

(M, 12/19) Final Paper Due