

Syllabus

Learning Objectives and Course Description

- Discuss the political and ethical dimensions of inequality
- Understand and be able to discuss the concept and different technical definitions of inequality (discussed in the course) from a philosophical and economic perspective
- Critically assess different inequality measurements and know their limitations
- Evaluate policies (discussed in the course) that aim to decrease inequality

“What is the origin of inequality among people, and is it authorized by natural law?” - Essay prompt by the Academy of Dijon, 1754

What is inequality? How can we measure it? Is it morally justified?

Economists from Karl Marx to Simon Kuznets and Thomas Piketty as well as philosophers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Rawls and Robert Nozick have all in various ways studied the mechanisms and legitimacy of inequality. Why are some incredibly wealthy while many are so poor? Can the current distribution of economic resources and political power be justified? As economic inequality is rising in most of the developed world, inequality has yet again resurfaced as one of the most important and contested topics of academic and political debate.

The aim of this course is to introduce the concept of inequality, i.e., what is inequality and why does it matter? Students will be introduced to the economic theories of inequality and its philosophical background. In the course we cover various definitions of inequality and discuss different methods of measuring inequality. We will look at both global and national/regional inequality, and discuss inequality along various dimensions, such as class, race, and gender. Finally, we address the ethical and political aspect of inequality: What is an appropriate level of inequality? Can inequality be justified? The course also covers potential policies to address inequality, including a discussion of whether such interventions should actually take place.

Course Structure

Readings

- The textbooks for the course are *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* (Sandel (2009)) and *Distributional Justice: Theory and Measurement* (Bojer (2005)). Bojer (2005) is available online through the CBS library system.
- In addition, we will read articles and excerpts from books which will be provided through Canvas. See the schedule below for required and optional readings.

Do the mandatory readings before class. But what does it mean to “do readings”? Reading is a skill that you can get better at.¹ For an academic setting like this course (as opposed to reading crime novels at the beach), it is important to read *actively*. Print out the readings and take notes in the margins. Try to summarize what you have read. Do you buy it? Why or why not? You need to be active, philosophy and economics are not spectator sports!

Try to understand the argument of the text before you criticize it. I like to imagine that I am being interviewed by morning television and asked to explain what I have just read as if I were the original author.² Don't worry *too much* if you have truly understood the argument that the original author made. Hundreds of books have been written on what Marx *really* meant.

Some of the texts are more difficult than others. Reach for the dictionary (or Wikipedia) some of the time, but don't worry if you don't understand every word. Put a question mark in the margin, talk to your classmates and bring it up in class. Occasionally, we will use some mathematics and statistics in this course. If you are a bit intimidated by math, don't worry, we will go through the parts we need in class, and you can always drop by my office hours.

Online and In-Person Lectures

Both the online and in-person lectures will be a mixture of me lecturing, and us collectively thinking through the issues. To get the most out of this course, it is important to attend class.

The lecture component of the online classes will be uploaded 24 hours before class, and I will ask you to watch these videos ahead of class. For some online classes, there will be a large pre-recorded component and we may only meet for 30 minutes on Zoom. For other online classes, there may be only a small pre-recorded component and we will have (say) 90 minutes of online class.

¹If you are interested, check out the classic ‘How to Read a Book’ by Adler.

²Funnily enough, lecturing about a topic works just as well...

Final Exam

The final exam will be a no-cooperation open-book 48-hour take-home exam October 26th-28th. Each week, I will give a handful of questions related to the week's readings for you to think about. Discuss these questions with your peers. Part of the exam will be based on the weekly recommended questions.

Office Hours

My office hours are 9-10 on Fridays **online on Zoom**. Usually, CBS students don't come to office hours, which is a shame. I want to emphasize that you don't need to understand everything perfectly to come to office hours. I also want to emphasize that you don't need to be struggling to come to office hours. You can also come and talk to me about economics in general, doing research, the news, or maybe even the sport of fencing.

Schedule

	Topics	Mandatory readings	Optional readings
Week 1 (Online)			
Lecture 1	Introduction, utilitarianism	Piketty (2014) pp. 1-16, Dennett (2013) pp. 1-15, Bentham (1824) pp. 65-69, 86-89	
Lecture 2	Utilitarianism	Sandel (2009) pp. 31-58, Singer (1972), 229-43	Mill (1861) pp. 272-98, Bojer (2005) pp.20-35
Week 2 (Online)			
Lecture 3	Rawls and Marx	Rawls (1971) pp. 207-21, Marx and Engels (1848) pp. 43-51	Roemer (1988) pp. 14-27, Bojer (2005) pp. 36-45, 54-55
Lecture 4	Libertarianism and conservatism	Sandel (2009) pp. 58-74, Friedman and Friedman (1980) pp. 128-149, Nozick (1974) pp. 45-61	Burke (1790), Bojer (2005) pp. 51-53, McCloskey (2006) pp. 337-45
Week 3			

	Topics	Mandatory readings	Optional readings
Lecture 5	The shape of the income distribution		Pareto (1896) pp. 304-12, Pigou (1929), Roy (1950)
Lecture 6	Measuring inequality I	Bojer (2005) pp. 65-91	Cowell (2009)
Week 4			
Lecture 7	Measuring inequality II	Bojer (2005) pp.92-11	Cowell (2009)
Lecture 8	Mid-course review		
Week 5 (Online)			
Lecture 9	The facts of inequality		Morelli et al. (2015), Roine and Waldenström (2015)
Lecture 10	Global inequality	Milanovic (2012) pp.125-34, Weyl (2018) pp.1-36	Anand and Segal (2015)
Week 6 (Online)			
Lecture 11	Capabilities	Sen (1995) pp. 259-73, Nussbaum (2011) pp. 46-68	Bojer (2005)
Lecture 12	Discrimination	Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) pp. 991-1013, Arai et al. (2016) pp.385-412	Goldin and Rouse (2000) pp. 715-41, Sarsons (2019)
Week 7			
Lecture 13	Taxation and inequality	Kleven (2014) pp. 77-98, Diamond and Saez (2011) pp.165-90	
Lecture 14	Tax avoidance, evasion, havens and inequality	TBD	
Week 8			
Lecture 15	Covid and inequality	TBD	
Lecture 16	End-of-course review		

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