POL 124B – SEMINAR: RACE, INEQUALITY, AND SOCIAL POLICY

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Schedule: Tues/Thurs, 5:00 – 6:20
Classroom: Mandel G12
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 3:45 – 4:45

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

Equality is a fundamental value in American political culture. Yet over the past several decades, the U.S. has grown more unequal in several ways. This course draws on the scholarly literature in several fields including political science, public policy, sociology, and economics to analyze the interaction between U.S. social policies and structures of inequality, broadly construed. We analyze numerous forms of inequality in contemporary America, including inequities of race, economic resources, gender, and political participation. Course readings explore these topics from a variety of theoretical and analytical approaches, from different ends of the political spectrum, and draw upon a range of empirical evidence and sources of data.

We begin by describing the nature of inequality in contemporary America. Course readings will introduce students to competing perspectives on how to think about and analyze poverty and inequality and help you understand the unique design and structure of the American welfare state. We will cover several policy areas in detail, including welfare and entitlement programs, criminal justice policies and the carceral state, housing and urban development programs, and education policy. While there are some important policy areas that we do not address, you are welcome to analyze programmatic areas from beyond the course readings in your research paper. Throughout the course, we will think critically about how to use public policy (and other means) to address long-standing structures of inequality.

This course is designed as an intensive seminar; it is not a lecture course. This course is a designated seminar and satisfies the seminar requirement for the Politics major and minor. Students are expected to actively contribute to and lead class discussions, and the reading and writing loads are demanding. While this course is open to all students and does not have any formal pre-requisites, it is best suited for upper-level students with a background in American politics. I expect that students will devote substantial time and effort toward fulfilling the course objectives. If you are looking to do minimal work in this course, then this may not be the best class for you. Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (e.g. completing course readings, working on paper assignments, preparing discussion points, etc.)

LEARNING GOALS

This course has four specific learning goals:

1. To introduce students to the scholarly literature on inequality and social policy. Students will examine what we know and investigate what we still need to learn about numerous forms of inequality in contemporary America and strategies designed to address those issues.
2. To develop students’ oral communication, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning skills through reading responses, writing assignments, and classroom discussions.
3. To familiarize students with a range of concepts, methods, and analytical approaches employed in political and social science research.
4. To teach students to use the tools of social science research to analyze an important public policy problem through an independent, semester-long research project.

**COURSE FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS**

I communicate with the class often via e-mail and Latte. You are expected the check your e-mail regularly. If I send out an announcement or reminder to the class via e-mail, I will expect that you have read it.

**Seminar Participation (25% of final grade)**
This course is designed as a discussion-based seminar. Thus, it is expected that student participation will be greater than the instructor’s. Students must come prepared to interrogate each session’s assigned readings, interact with their peers, and respond to comments made by their classmates and the instructor. Like many courses that discuss political and social topics, we will often discuss and analyze subjects that are sometimes considered controversial. It is imperative that every participant in the class (instructor and students, alike) strive to maintain an environment that facilitates learning. Differences of opinion should be respected and we will maintain a high level of civility when asking questions and making comments.

**Discussion Leader (20% of final grade)**
On two occasions throughout the semester, students will select one assigned reading in a given session and come prepared to lead the day’s discussion of that reading. Discussion leaders are to prepare a two-page response based on their chosen reading for that session. These responses are designed to prepare students to lead and direct the class discussion. Use the response papers to highlight aspects of the reading that you found interesting, confusing, or thought-provoking. The following questions will help guide your responses:

1. What is the central question that the author is seeking to address?
2. What is the nature of the evidence and the analytical approach the author relies upon to answer that question?
3. How convincing is the author’s analysis and findings?
4. What potential alternative explanations can you think of to answer the author’s research question?

Each discussion leader opportunity will count for 10% of your final grade, for a total of 20% of your overall course grade.

**Term Research Paper and Preliminary Assignments (55% of final grade)**
Students will prepare an independent, empirical research paper of 15 pages on a topic of their choice. Students are expected to meet with the instructor to discuss potential topics, methodological and
analytical approaches, sources, outlines of their argument, etc. as the semester progresses. Three preliminary assignments will ensure that students make adequate progress toward their final paper throughout the semester. These assignments are designed to follow a logical research progression and build upon one another. I will distribute more details about these assignments both in class and on the course Latte site. The preliminary assignments are as follows:

1. **Research Statement**: Students are required to prepare a 1-2 statement of their proposed research which describes a specific question, outlines a research plan, and identifies preliminary sources of evidence. This proposal is due in class on **Tuesday, February 14. The proposal is worth 5% of your grade.**

2. **Annotated Bibliography**: Students will also prepare a 3-5 page annotated bibliography of the sources you plan to use in your research paper, due in class on **Tuesday, March 14. The annotated bibliography is worth 10% of your grade.**

3. **Analytical Review**: As a prelude to the completed research paper, students will prepare a 5-7 page analytical review of their research materials and sources, due in class on **Thursday, April 6. This assignment should take the form of a professional literature review. You should identify disagreements across sources, evaluate different sources of evidence, and highlight how your own argument and evidence contributes to the scholarly literature on your research topic. Use the template and questions that guide your discussion leader assignment to draw comparisons across a set of readings. The analytical review is worth 10% of your grade.**

Your final research paper is due via upload to Latte at 5:00PM on Monday, May 8. **The final research paper will count for 30% of your final grade.** You are expected to follow the formatting and citations guidelines outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Previous editions of this book are widely available at independent bookstores and online retailers. I will distribute more detailed descriptions of each of these assignments during the semester.

**Required Texts**

We will read the following books in their entirety or close to it. They are available for purchase in the campus bookstore, through online retailers, and at some local, independent bookstores. They will also be placed on reserve in the Brandeis library. *Degrees of Inequality* is available for free online courtesy of the Brandeis Library’s ebrary service.


All other course materials will be made available on Latte or distributed in class.
A NOTE ON LAPTOPS, TABLETS, CELL PHONES, AND OTHER TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES

In class meetings, you may not use a laptop, tablet, cell phone, or any other similar device. When people use these devices, they distract not only themselves, but also the instructor and others around them. Exceptions will be granted for students who can produce written documentation that they require such an accommodation.

Given that this is a discussion-based seminar and we will spend class sessions closely interrogating the assigned readings, students are expected to bring notes or print out course materials and bring them to class in order to reference them. I am happy to make copies of course materials, but you must let me know ahead of time if you require print-outs of specific readings.

DISABILITIES AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services (x6-3470 or brodgers@brandeis.edu.) Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations, and absolutely before the day of an exam or test. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University’s Rights and Responsibilities handbook (http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/) for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently, except when assignments specifically authorize collaborative effort. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, it is your responsibility to ask for clarification. Citation and research assistance can be found at the LTS website (http://guides.library.brandeis.edu/c.php?g=301723). Any suspected instances of alleged dishonesty will be referred to the Office of Student Development and Conduct. Instances of academic dishonesty may result in sanctions including but not limited to, failing grades being issued, educational programs, and suspension.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

NOTE: I reserve the right to change the schedule over the course of the semester. I will announce any and all changes in class or via the course Latte site.

Introduction and Overview

Tuesday, January 17: Does Inequality Matter?

Poverty and Inequality in Contemporary America

Thursday, January 19: Poverty and Inequality in Contemporary America

4. The Geography of Upward Mobility in the United States: [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/06/02/these-maps-from-raj-chetty-show-that-where-children-grow-up-has-a-major-impact-on-their-lifetime-earnings/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/06/02/these-maps-from-raj-chetty-show-that-where-children-grow-up-has-a-major-impact-on-their-lifetime-earnings/)

Tuesday, January 24: Racial Inequality: Health and Wealth

3. Dayna Bowen Matthew and Richard V. Reeves, “6 Charts Showing Race Gaps Within the American Middle Class,” *Brookings Social Mobility Memos*, October 21, 2016: [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/10/21/6-charts-showing-race-gaps-within-the-american-middle-class/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/10/21/6-charts-showing-race-gaps-within-the-american-middle-class/)

Thursday, January 26: Marginalization and Declining Mobility


Tuesday, January 31: Gender, Public Policy, and Inequality

Thursday, February 2: Analytical Approaches and Theoretical Explanations


The Contours of the American Welfare State

Tuesday, February 7: Is the American Welfare State Exceptional?


Thursday, February 9: Building the American Welfare State


Tuesday, February 14: Policy Feedback and Democratic Citizenship

***NOTE: Research Statement Due***


Thursday, February 16: Public Opinion and the Welfare State: A Cause or a Consequence?


**Tuesday, February 21 – No class**

**Thursday, February 23 – No class**

*Public Assistance, Social Insurance, and the Safety Net*

**Tuesday, February 28: How Safe is the Safety Net?**


**Thursday, March 2: Safety Net Programs as Poverty Traps**


**Tuesday, March 7: Race, Gender, and Welfare Policy**


Housing, Segregation, and Urban Policy

Tuesday, March 14: Housing and Urban Policy: History and Background
***NOTE: Annotated Bibliography Due***


Thursday, March 16: Urban Policy and the Importance of Neighborhoods


Tuesday, March 21: Toward a More Durable and Equitable Urban Policy


Criminal Justice, Mass Imprisonment, and the Carceral State

Thursday, March 23: US Criminal Justice Policy: History and Background


Tuesday, March 28: Criminal Justice Policy and Social Citizenship


Thursday, March 30: Custodial Citizens and Reform Recommendations

Education Policy

Tuesday, April 4: Educational Inequities


Thursday, April 6: Pre-K and K-12 Education
***NOTE: Analytical Review Due***


Tuesday, April 11 – No class

Thursday, April 13 – No class

Tuesday, April 18 – No class

Thursday, April 20: Higher Education I


Tuesday, April 25: Higher Education II


Thursday, April 27: Reforming U.S. Education Policy

Now What?

Tuesday, May 2: Policy Recommendations to Restore the American Dream

