

Spring 2016
Richard Miller
2:30-4:25 T
206 Stimson

**TOPICS IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
TOPIC FOR FALL 2013 – INEQUALITIES**

Phil 4470/6430, Govt 4655/6656, AmSt 4655/6656, Soc 4430/6430

In this uniquely interdisciplinary course, we will discuss the leading questions posed by the diverse yet interlocking aspects of inequality – economic, political, racial, educational and social. Five of our meetings will be workshops led by eminent scholars investigating inequality in the United States who will come to Cornell as part of the Ethics and Public Life series "Inequalities: How Deep? Why? What Should Be Done?" They are Benjamin Page (Political Science, Northwestern) on political inequality, Miles Corak (Economics, Ottawa) on unequal economic opportunity, David Grusky (Sociology, Stanford) on limits to competition and the current increase in inequality, Prudence Carter (Education, Stanford) on racial inequality, and Karl Alexander (Sociology, Johns Hopkins) on the interaction of family, school and society in shaping inequality. Our other meetings will emphasize the leading debates over the moral principles that should be used in judging current inequalities, the social structures that create them and proposals that could reduce them. **There is a detailed schedule of topics, readings, and visitor-led sessions at the end of this syllabus.**

Readings:

All assigned readings and some optional ones as well will be either posted in the Contents section of the course Blackboard site or sent by e-mail in a message conveying the readings and specific topic that each visitor will supply.

Course Requirements:

1. Attendance and participation. This seminar will be an opportunity for people with diverse academic interests and backgrounds, experiences and (I hope) moral and political perspectives to learn from one another by discussing a topic that is their shared concern. Everyone is expected to take part in discussions at each meeting of the seminar on the basis of knowledge of the readings and Discussion Board contributions.
2. Discussion Board contributions. Every week, I will ask two or three people to take on the task of each contributing one to three questions or brief comments about next week's readings to the Discussion Board on the course website. The contributions must be posted by 8:00 PM on Monday, so that everyone has a chance to read them. I will share the responses to the readings that visitors assign with the visitors before their workshops. Of course, everyone is welcome to contribute and to comment on others' posts.
3. Short paper: A short paper, of from six to eight pages double spaced, will be due at class on March 22. I will hand out a list of topics on March 8. The focus will be on the assessment of what justice requires in response to the inequalities that will have been examined in the course.
4. Term paper: A term paper, 12-15 pages long, will be due May 17. I will distribute a list of possible term paper topics on April 19. People are welcome to write a paper on any topic

connected with our readings or with visitors' presentations. But please consult with me about manageability and relevant readings if you are thinking of writing on a topic far removed from the list.

The weight of factors contributing to the final grade will be, approximately: term paper 60%; participation (including Discussion Board postings), 20%; short paper, 20%.

A bit more about the workshops: At the workshops, we will be joined by interested faculty and graduate students. However, everyone taking the course will have ample opportunity to take part in discussions. There may also be some possibilities for participation in informal get-togethers in connection with the visits. Each of the visitors leading a workshop will supply a topic with readings, often derived from their current or recent research. Some will start with a formal presentation, others with informal remarks, and all will leave substantial time for discussion.

A bit about the following course schedule: The visitors and I will discuss topics and readings starting about two weeks before they come. I will convey this information in good time. For now, I will offer brief descriptions of each visitor's achievements and general topics. The other topics and readings are subject to change depending on how our discussions go. Because of the schedule of visits and some quirks of the Cornell calendar, they do not neatly match neighboring visitor-led workshops. Instead, they are an investigation of major controversies in social and political philosophy over the moral importance of modern inequalities, in a sequence that eventually engages with all of the phenomena our visiting social scientists illuminate.

Course Schedule

February 2: How might inequality matter? Readings: Harry Frankfurt, "Equality and Respect;" Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal" (excerpt); Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here?* (excerpt). Making use of a brief Powerpoint show which I will post, we will exchange our initial responses to current U.S. inequalities and, then, use Frankfurt's and Dworkin's essays to start to discuss how current inequalities ought to be judged. According to Frankfurt, economic equality has no importance as such. Dworkin offers an influential basis for criticizing current inequalities. Does this basis provide a way of avoiding Frankfurt's critique?

February 9: Benjamin Page (Political Science, Northwestern) will lead a workshop on political inequality in the United States. His important studies of the interaction of politics and economic inequality include *Class War?: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality* (co-authored with Lawrence Jacobs) and a recent, much-discussed article, with Martin Gilens, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens."

[February 16: University holiday]

February 23: Miles Corak (Economics, University of Ottawa) will lead a workshop on the extent and causes of unequal economic opportunity. His influential studies of the intergenerational transmission of advantage include important investigations of international differences and recent changes.

March 1: David Grusky (Sociology, Stanford) will lead a workshop on special advantages sustaining the incomes of the best-off. His recent influential inquiries into the current rise in inequality have included analyses of the differential impact of the Great Recession and of the role of limits to competition in the steep rise in income of the best-off occupations.

March 8: Equality and liberty. Readings: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (excerpts); Jan Narveson, "Liberty, Equality and Distributive Justice." Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (original edition: 1971) is the central text in modern political philosophy, providing precedents for most current moral arguments for reducing economic inequality. While it is a long book, to which an enormous literature has responded, the excerpts present the core of his argument about economic justice. The libertarian objection that Rawlsian reduction of inequality would unjustly interfere with capitalist economic liberties is a fundamental challenge, vigorously advanced by Narveson.

March 15: Prudence Carter (Education, Stanford) will lead a workshop on racial inequality. Her studies of the impact of race and class on education and opportunity include two recent important books, *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (with Kevin Welner) and *Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. and South African Schools*.

March 22: How important is equality of opportunity? Readings: David Miller, "Equality of Opportunity and the Family;" Richard Arneson, "Against Rawlsian Equality of Opportunity." Like many, probably most non-philosophers, political philosophers who seek to reduce economic inequality are typically specially opposed to inequality of opportunity. For Dworkin, a demand for equality of opportunity is the whole story of economic justice. For Rawls, fair equality of opportunity has priority over promoting the life-prospects of the worst-off. In contrast, Miller proposes stringent limits to the value of equal opportunity, while Arneson denies that fair equality of opportunity is separate from yet prior to the further goal of helping the worst-off.

[March 29: Spring Break]

April 5: Are workers typically exploited? Readings: Allen Wood, "Exploitation;" Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (excerpts); Richard Miller, "Unequal Bargaining Power and Economic Justice." It is sometimes said that the buying and selling of labor typically involves an inequality that might be labelled "exploitation" which can serve as a justification for changing market processes and outcomes. If so, Grusky's criticism of market-distortions earlier in the semester might have extremely wide-ranging implications. Wood identifies exploitation with deriving advantage from others' weakness. This suggests that weaknesses in workers' typical bargaining situations noted by Smith might be a basis for claiming exploitation. I explore this basis in my essay.

April 12: Is political equality important as such? Readings: Stephen Darwall, "Equal Representation;" Richard Arneson, "Democracy Is Not Intrinsically Just." Objections to the political inequalities that Benjamin Page describes sometimes imply that democratic participation on equal terms, including some form of equality of political influence, is morally important as such. Darwall argues that this equality is required by respect for persons. Arneson argues that it is, at most, a useful instrument for producing further good consequences.

April 19: What to do about racial inequality. We will probably discuss the Supreme Court decision and opinions in the current affirmative action case, *Fisher v. University of Texas*.

April 26: Karl Alexander (Sociology, Johns Hopkins) will lead a workshop on the interaction of family, school, and society in shaping inequality. His investigations of the interaction of schooling, family, socio-economic background, neighborhood, and racial discrimination in shaping prospects of success have often derived from his centrally important study of life-trajectories of people who began first grade in Baltimore public schools in 1982, most recently presented in *The Long Shadow: Family Background, Disadvantaged Urban Youth and the Transition to Adulthood*.

May 3. What Is Poverty? Readings: Dennis Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (excerpt); Sarah Halpern-Meekin, Kathryn Edin, Laura Tach and Jennifer Sykes, *It's Not Like I'm Poor* (excerpt); Amartya Sen, "Poor, Relatively Speaking." Most people, including many conservatives, believe that government should help people to rise from poverty, even if they object to further measures that would reduce inequality. But the principled basis for setting a threshold for poverty is unclear – which also suggests the need to scrutinize Frankfurt's threshold of sufficiency, in his article at the start of the course. Gilbert describes the variety of poverty lines proposed for the U.S., including the official line. Halpern-Meekin et al. illustrate the complexity of the question with the situations of people in their important study of recipients of the Earned Income Tax Credit. Sen argues that "relative poverty" is best seen as an indicator of incapacities that are not relative, as such.

May 10. Goals of community. A vision of a way of life that should be nurtured and promoted is basic to most people's judgments of inequality. But few recent philosophers have explicated and justified their conception of community in defending their view of economic justice. We will conclude by discussing some rival conceptions, based on writings of G.A. Cohen, Friedrich Hayek, and Elizabeth Anderson.