

AS.001.132 Exploring Economic Inequality
Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2023
Wednesday: 9 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. in Greenhouse 113
Syllabus

Instructor: Barbara Morgan, Department of Economics

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Office Hours: by appointment

WELCOME!

I am excited that you decided to sign up for this First-Year Seminar. We will share ideas, discuss readings, and end the semester collectively more informed about this topic than when we started it.

Course Description

In this seminar, we examine inequalities in income, wealth and working conditions in the United States today. What do the historical trends look like and how do economists explain them? Is economic inequality a significant problem? If so, why? And what tools do we have in the policy arsenal to address it? We will draw on diverse sources, including economics readings, op-eds, podcasts and short vignettes from literature to motivate our weekly discussions. You will have the opportunity to present group research and lead class discussions drawing on the economic concepts developed in class. At the end of the semester, you will complete an individual research project exploring some aspect of economic inequality, inspired by your own selection from literature, poetry, music, or film.

Website

This course has a Canvas website, which you should consult frequently for announcements, links to the syllabus, and current news items. Canvas will also be used as a forum for online discussions. You can access the course website at: <https://canvas.jhu.edu>

Learning Goals

Our collective goals this semester, as with all FYS courses, are to cultivate intellectual community and curiosity, establish foundational critical thinking skills, encourage meaningful civil exchange across different disciplinary perspectives and people from diverse backgrounds, and foster early and sustained faculty-student interaction and mentorship. In addition, after taking this course, you will be more adept at following economic news and interpreting it, and will know much more about the impact the economy has (and will have) on your life.

Class Requirements

The class is largely discussion-based, although occasionally I will present a few slides illustrating economic trends or concepts. Each week you will be required to read the assigned material. In weeks 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 (starred on the syllabus) please submit to the Canvas discussion board a short (200 words) reflection on the readings, no later than Monday at 10 p.m.. Conclude your post by asking a

couple of questions, pertinent to any of the readings, that you would like to discuss in class. Please come to class prepared to comment on, and critique, the assigned reading and ask questions.

You will be involved in one group presentation (October 4, on either unions or minimum wage) and one student-led discussions (joint with another student), details to follow. At the end of the course, you will give an individual presentation. Use the knowledge you have gained in terms of oral, writing, data and presentation skills to engage the class in some aspect of inequality that you are passionate about, motivated by literature, but largely based on economic theory and evidence. I will consult with each of you individually about your presentation. Finally, submit a three-page paper summarizing your insights and findings by 10 p.m. on Friday, December 8th. The paper should be approximately 750 words, double-spaced, 12-point font, 1 inch margins. If you would like help with your writing, please make an appointment with the Writing Center at <https://krieger.jhu.edu/writingcenter/>

We will generally take a break in the middle of class, and sometimes I will finish class early to chat with you individually.

This is a 3-credit course required of all freshmen, graded S/U. To pass this course, you will need to:

- submit a post prior to class when required
- come to class prepared to discuss the readings
- participate in a group presentation
- lead one discussion
- participate in an individual presentation, with associated short paper

This is a low-tech class. No cellphones or laptops, unless you need it for a presentation. Rely on notebooks and pens or pencils.

Absences and Extensions

Class attendance is expected. Please notify me by email of any family or medical emergency that may interfere with your ability to attend class so that we can discuss how to make up for missed class time or late assignments. Please notify me if you are being quarantined for COVID-19 so that accommodations may be made.

Course Outline and Reading List

Date:

- 8/30** **Reflections on Equality and Inequality**
George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Chapter 10, 1951.
Noah, Timothy, "Introduction" in *The Great Divergence* (New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2012) 1-9.
- 9/6** ***Is Income Inequality a Problem? If so, Why?**
Excerpt from Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957.
Podcast: "Does U.S. Economic Inequality have a Good Side?" Paul Solman interviews Richard Epstein, PBS NewsHour, October 26, 2011
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/does-u-s-economic-inequality-have-a-good-side>
Robert H. Frank, "Inequality's Muse," *The American Interest*, 11(2)

October 15, 2015.

John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Chapter 17 “The Theory of Social Balance,” 1958.

9/13

***Trends in Income**

Excerpts from F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925.

Saez, Emmanuel, "Income and Wealth Inequality: Evidence and Policy Implications," *Contemporary Economic Policy* 35 2017 (1) 7-18 and conclusion 24-25.

9/20

***Can Education and Technology Explain Income Inequality?**

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Chapter 5, 1939.

Goldin, Claudia and Laurence Katz, “The Future of Inequality: The Other Reason Education Matters so Much,” *Milken Institute Review* 2009 (3) 28-33.

Krugman, Paul, “Education Has Less to do with Inequality than You Think,” *New York Times*, 29 April, 2022.

The Upshot “Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1% than the Bottom 60. Find yours.”

Also, explore the interactive link.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>

9/27

***Can Trade and Globalization Explain Income Inequality?**

Woodrow Wilson Presentation

Parable: Frederic Bastiat, *Petition of the Manufacturers of Candles*, 1845.

Krugman, Paul, “Trouble with Trade,” *New York Times*, 28 December, 2007.

Milanovic, Branko, “The Tale of Two Middle Classes,” *Yale Global Online* 2014.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151218022812/http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/print/9416>

10/4

Can Unions or Minimum Wage Explain Income Inequality?

Unions – Group Presentation

Excerpt from Erskine Caldwell, “*God’s Little Acre*”, 1933.

Review of Richard Freeman and James Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* by Theresa Ghilarducci, *Journal of Legislation Issues* (1) 1985, 119-121.

Minimum Wage – Group Presentation

Wright, Richard, *Black Boy*, (New York, Harper Collins 1944), 14-22.

Heather Boushey, “From Poverty to Opportunity: How a Fair Minimum Wage will help Families Succeed,” Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, March 12, 2014, 1-11.

- 10/11 *Inequality in Working Conditions – Discussion led by Lia and Madison
Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, Chapter 13, 1905.
 Gunduelsberger, Emily, *On the Clock*, (Little, Brown and Co. 2019) EITHER
 Part 1 “Amazon” 15-125 OR Part 3 “McDonald’s,” 237-307.
- 10/18 *The Top 1% and CEO Pay – Discussion led by Aaron and Jackson
Optional Movie: “The Big Short,” starring Steve Carrell and Ryan Gosling,
 dir. Adam McKay, 2015 and/or “Wall Street” starring Michael Douglas and
 Charlie Sheen, dir. Oliver Stone, 1987.
 Podcast: “CEO Pay, “Dan Rodricks interviews Michael B. Dorff, 3
 December 2021 at: <http://wypr.org/post/ceo-pay>
 Peter Eavis, “How Elon Musk Helped Lift the Ceiling on CEO Pay,” *New
 York Times*, 25 June 2022.
- 10/25 Discussion over breakfast of topics thus far
- 11/1 *Policies to Address Inequality in Income and Working Conditions
**Poem: James Oppenheimer “Bread and Roses” 1911, inspired by a speech to
 striking textile workers by labor leader Rose Schneiderman. Here are
 two excellent versions:**
Joan Baez. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqJHUKOTLOQ>
Women of the World <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94mSln34ZwA>
 Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote, “Why Doesn’t the
 United States Have a European-Style Welfare State?” *Brookings Papers on
 Economic Activity* 2 (2001), 187-203 and 246-247 ONLY.
 Stiglitz, Joseph E., *The Price of Inequality* (W.W. Norton, 2013) Chapter 10,
 “The Way Forward,” 332-363.
- 11/8 *Wealth Inequality
Excerpt from Johns Dos Passos *Prince of Peace*, 1930.
 William Darity, The Racial Foundations of Income and Wealth,”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8ItCSh6LSE> 32:43 – 48:00
 minutes
 Review of Thomas Picketty’s “A Brief History of Equality,” by Nicholas
 Lemann, *New York Times*, 19 April 2022.
- 11/15 Instructor will meet individually with students in preparation for final
 presentations
- 11/22 No Class, Fall Recess
- 12/6 Individual Presentations

University-Wide policies applicable to this class:

Academic Ethics

The strength of the university environment depends on academic and personal integrity. Dishonesty hurts our community by undermining academic integrity, creating mistrust and fostering unfair competition.

Ethical violations can include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments without permission, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery, falsification and lying. Sanctions include failure on an assignment, failure in a course, permanent transcript notations and/or expulsion from the University. Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse.

Please report any violations you are aware of to the Associate Dean of Student Conduct by calling the Office of the Dean of Students at 410-516-8208 or by email to deanofstudents@jhu.edu. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please talk to the instructor or access the JHU website on academic integrity at <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/undergrad-ethics/>.

Disability

Any student with a disability who needs accommodation in this class must obtain an accommodation letter from the Office of Student Disability Services, Shaffer Hall #101. Call 410-516- 4720, email studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu or visit the website <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/disabilities/> Please request accommodations for this course as early as possible so that arrangements can be made.

Classroom Climate

The instructor is committed to creating a classroom environment that values the diversity of experiences and perspectives that students bring. Everyone in the classroom has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Research and experience show that students who interact with peers who are different from them learn new things and experience tangible educational outcomes. Please join us in creating a welcoming and vibrant classroom climate.

You should expect to be challenged intellectually by the instructor and your peers, and at times this may feel uncomfortable. This is sometimes one way in which we learn and grow. But at no time in this learning process should someone be singled out or treated unequally on the basis of any seen or unseen part of their identity. If you ever have concerns in this course about harassment, discrimination, or any unequal treatment, or if you seek accommodations or resources, please contact me. I will take your communication seriously and seek mutually acceptable resolutions. Reporting will never impact your course grade.

You may also share concerns with the Departmental Chair (Professor Yingyao Hu, yhu@jhu.edu) the Director of Undergraduates Studies ((Professor Soma Dasgupta, sdasgupta@jhu.edu) the Co- Director of Undergraduate Studies (Professor Muhammad Husain mhusain8@jhu.edu) the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion (Darlene Saporu, dsaporu@jhu.edu), or the Office of Institutional Equity (oie@jhu.edu). In handling reports, your privacy will be protected as much as possible, but faculty and staff are required to officially report information for some cases (e.g. sexual harassment.)

Counseling

The first year in college is particularly difficult. If you are struggling with anxiety, stress, depression, or any other mental health-related concern, please visit the JHU Counseling Center. If you are concerned about a friend, please encourage the person to seek out their services. They can be reached at 410-516-8278 and online at <http://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/counselingcenter/> Students can also contact student Outreach and Support at 410-516-7857 or email deanofstudents@jhu.edu.

