Course description:
As a recent report by Brookings Institution aptly stated, 2013 was the year that social mobility went mainstream. In a widely-publicized speech at the end of the year President Obama argued: “

“The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe. And it is not simply a moral claim that I’m making here. There are practical consequences to rising inequality and reduced mobility.”

This course will tackle questions of social mobility and inequality from a historical, political, and moral perspective.

We will address questions such as:

What do we mean by social mobility? What do we mean by inequality?
Why do we care about inequality and social mobility?
What role did inequality play in the development of American capitalism?
How did American policymakers deal with challenges of inequality and mobility in the early 20th century?
How did the politics of social mobility and inequality change over time?
Why does the US have lower levels of redistribution than most other advanced countries?
How do Americans’ views on inequality differ from citizens of other advanced nations?
Does inequality affect the degree to which citizens’ views are represented by their government?
Has rising levels of inequality played a role in the recent financial crisis?

This course is heavy on the reading side. You will be reading around 150 pages per week. It is heavy on the writing side. You will be writing a one-page (250-300 words) reflection paper for 8 of our 13 sessions together. In addition, you will complete three homework assignments throughout the semester, and write a short term paper (2500-3000 words). Participation will make up a large portion of your grade. You must come to class having read the material carefully. You will ask questions, make comments, and be ready to debate with each other. I am not a big fan of “cold calls” but I might resort to that once in a while to make sure that the class discussion is not dominated by a few students only. At the end of the semester, we will, as a class, organize a symposium on Thomas Piketty’s Capital in the 21st Century. More on that later!

Books to purchase:
- Larry Bartels, Unequal Democracy
- Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton, American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass
- Bruce Western, Punishment and Inequality in America
- Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, Winner-Take-All Politics
1. Introduction

What is social class? How does it work? What do we mean by social mobility? What do we mean by inequality? What does economic inequality in the United States look like today? How has the dispersion of income and wealth changed over time for various groups of Americans?

September 2:

- Emmanuel Saez, “Striking it Richer”
- Chrystia Freeland, “The rise of the new global elite” in the Atlantic.

September 9:

- Selections from The Meritocracy Myth
- Jonnson et al. “It’s a Decent Bet That Our Children Will Be Professors Too”
- Peter Gottschalk. 1997. “Inequality, Income Growth, and Mobility”
- PEW study, “Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations”
- Beller and Haut, “Intergenerational Social Mobility”

2: Theories About Inequality As a Moral Issue

How have political theorists thought about economic inequality? What is the relationship between inequality and both social and political justice?

September 16:

- Amartya Sen, Inequality Reexamined, Chapter 1
- John Rawls, Theory of Justice, Chapters 2, 5.

3: Inequality and Struggles for Equality and Mobility in America

Here we examine inequality and social mobility in a historical perspective. We will first talk about the ‘roaring twenties’. Then we will discuss the political, economic, and social shifts that took place during the Great Depression. We will discuss the New Deal - how these policies came about and how they impacted American society. Then we will move on the 1960s and 70s.

September 23:

- Francis Fox Piven. Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail. Chapter 2.
- Film Cindrella Man.
September 30:

• Discussing Cindarella Man.
• Francis Fox Piven. Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (parts of chapter 3)
• J. Patterson, America’s Struggle Against Poverty, Section 2, chapters 3, 4, 5

October 7:

• Patterson, J. America’s Struggle Against Poverty, Sections 3 and 4 (Chapters 6, 12).
• Robert Lieberman, Shaping Race policy, pages 75-147.

October 14:


4. The New Gilded Age: Inequality and Social mobility in the Neoliberal Era

Post 70s witnessed increasing concentration of income and wealth in the US. In this section of the course we will discuss what these changes entail, how they came about, and what they mean for American democracy.

October 28:

• Gosta Esping Andersen, Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism
• Larry Bartels, Unequal Democracy, Chapter 1.
• Barbara Ehrenreich, excerpt from Nickel and Dimed.
• Lane Kenworthy, Progress for the Poor, selections
• Lane Kenworthy, Social Democratic America, selections

5. Inequality, Public Policy, Public Opinion

What is the nature of American welfare state? What does the US government do to curb inequality? What do Americans think about economic inequality? In what circumstances and to what extent do they consider it a problem for democracy? Do they think that government should take measures to lessen inequality? Which tools of public policy are most and least effect in alleviating inequality? How are different groups in the population affected by particular programs, depending on employment status, income or wealth, and age?

November 4:

• Larry Bartels, Unequal Democracy, Chapters 5, 6.
• Nathan Glazer, “Why Don’t Americans Care about Income Inequality?” Wiener Inequality and Social Policy Seminar, Kennedy School, Harvard University.
• Martin Gillens, Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy.
6. Punishment and Inequality in America

**November 11:**

- Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, selections.
- Loïc Wacquant, “Crafting the Neoliberal State”.

7. Democratic Consequences of Increasing Inequalities

Do Americans have an opportunity to exercise political voice? How representative are expressions of political voice both in terms of who takes part and what they say? How does economic inequality relate to political power in governing institutions? Do those with greater resources have greater influence?

**November 18:**

- Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, chapter 9, 10

8. Reading Piketty’s Capital in the 21st Century

**November 25:**

Group discussions on Piketty

**December 2:** Thomas Piketty Symposium at the Russel House!