This course reviews classical and contemporary approaches to understanding the differential distribution of valued goods and the social processes by which such inequality comes to be seen as legitimate, natural, or desirable. Although egalitarian values are a fundamental feature of our post-Enlightenment heritage, these values exist in tension with the extreme and, in some cases, increasing levels of inequality that are part and parcel of the contemporary late industrial experience. We appear to be entering a new era of change not just in the amount of inequality but also in the processes that generate and maintain inequality as well as the consequences of inequality for lifestyles, consumption practices, and life chances. The foregoing changes invite fresh study of the structure of social inequality and how it varies by time and place. We will be discussing questions and issues of the following kind:

(a) What are the major forms of inequality in human history? Is inequality an inevitable feature of human life?
(b) Why is income inequality increasing in so many countries? What are the effects of this increase on other domains of social life?
(c) Is the recession increasing income inequality? Wealth inequality? Which groups are most harmed by the recession? Most protected?
(d) How many social classes are there? What are the principal “fault lines” or social cleavages that define the class structure? Are these cleavages strengthening or weakening with the transition to advanced industrialism?
(e) How frequently do individuals cross occupational or class boundaries? Are educational degrees, social contacts, or “individual luck” increasingly important forces in matching individuals to jobs and class positions?
(f) How are the lifestyles, attitudes, and personalities of individuals shaped by their class locations? Are there identifiable “class cultures” in past and present societies?
(g) What types of social processes and state policies serve to maintain or alter racial, ethnic, and sex discrimination in labor markets? Have these forms of discrimination weakened or strengthened with the transition to late industrialism?
(h) Will inequality regimes take on new and distinctive forms in the future? Are the inequality regimes of modern societies gradually shedding their distinctive features and converging towards some generic late industrial regime?

Structure of course: The twofold objective of this course is to review contemporary theorizing and research on these issues and to identify areas in which new theories, hypotheses, and research agendas might be fruitfully developed. The class meetings will have the following structure:
Clarifying questions (approx. 4:15pm to 4:30pm): We will lead off by taking any questions that may have emerged in the course of completing the readings for that week. These questions may take the form of questions of clarification or of provocation (i.e., questions that consider how prevailing conceptualizations, models, or research literatures have led us astray or might usefully be supplemented). It is the responsibility of students to prepare questions of this sort insofar as the readings are unclear. If no questions of clarification or provocation emerge, then we will move directly to the next task, as outlined below.

Question #1 (approx. 4:30pm to 5:15pm): I will next pose a question that’s similar in style and spirit to the type of question that might appear on the sociology qualifying exam. We will collectively build an outline laying out how that question might be taken on. The question will potentially draw on all the readings that have been completed up to that week.

Question #2 (approx. 5:15pm to 6:00pm): I will then pose a second question, again of the qualifying exam style, and we’ll turn to laying out an outline for that question, just as we did for the first question. (And again the question will potentially draw on all the readings that have been completed up to that week.)

Research proposals: Although the course is thus nominally built around the sociology qualifying exam, this should prove to be a more generally useful device for learning the field, even for those not taking this exam. In the course of building our outlines, we will attempt, for example, to identify new research opportunities, ones that could be converted into research papers (either for the present course or later).

Deliverables: As for course requirements, students may choose from two options, a qualifying exam option or a research paper option.

Qualifying exam option: For some of the students, the course is being used for the purpose of preparing for a qualifying exam (as noted), and it should be useful for such students to write practice exams. I will distribute two exam questions, the first on April 28 (due one week later at the beginning of the next week’s class), and the second on May 26 (due one week later on Thursday, June 2). Each essay should be limited to 3000 words (or approximately 10 double-spaced pages).

Research paper option: The second option takes the form of a bona fide research paper or research proposal. If the proposal form is chosen, it’s more useful if it pertains to a project that might practically be achieved within the time and resource constraints that you face (i.e., a realistic proposal for a project that might truly be taken on). The paper should be limited to 6000 words (or approximately 20 double-spaced pages) and is due on Thursday, June 2.

Grades: The course grades will, for those students taking the qualifying exam option, be based on (a) the first exam essay (40%), (b) the second exam essay (40%), and (c) class participation (20%). For students taking the research paper option, the course grades will be based on (a) the paper (80%), and (b) class participation (20%).

Readings: The course readings will be drawn from Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective (3rd edition). This book is available at the Stanford University Bookstore and all other usual outlets. (It should be noted that the reading list for the qualifying exam contains some articles that are not in Social Stratification.)
COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1: Introduction (Thursday, March 31)
Organizational meeting

Week 2: Forms and sources of inequality (Thursday, April 7)
Readings: Part I & 2, Social Stratification

Week 3: The structure of contemporary inequality (Thursday, April 14)
Readings: Part III, Social Stratification

Week 4: Inequality at the extremes (Thursday, April 21)
Readings: Part IV, Social Stratification

Week 5: Generating inequality (Thursday, April 28)
Readings: Part V, Social Stratification

Week 6: Race & ethnicity (Thursday, May 5)
Readings: Part VI, Social Stratification

Week 7: Gender inequality (Thursday, May 12)
Readings: Part VII, Social Stratification

Week 8: The consequences of inequality (Thursday, May 19)
Readings: Part VIII, Social Stratification

Week 9: The future of inequality (Thursday, May 26)
Readings: Part IX, Social Stratification