Inequality is now at the forefront of public debate. Indeed, in more than three quarters of OECD countries, the last 30 years have been characterized by substantial increases in income inequality. In some countries, like the US, UK and Canada, the surge in inequality is such that it has reached levels not seen in more than a century. What are the causes and consequences of this rise in inequality? Why should we be concerned with rising inequality in the first place? What can we learn from studying the geographical dimensions of the problem?

The goal of this course is to develop your understanding of some of the main issues relevant to current debates about inequality. We will explore these issues using different theoretical perspectives from across the social sciences and empirical case studies drawn from different (though mostly developed) countries. As an advanced economic geography class, emphasis will also be placed on understanding spatial variations in patterns of inequality across different scales of analysis.

The required readings will be made available to you on a weekly basis. PDFs of journal articles will be uploaded directly on myCourses for you to download. Book chapters will also be scanned as PDFs and posted on-line along with other relevant materials (if required).

As you prepare for the seminar each week, you should begin by writing-up a short summary of the readings. In doing so, strive to locate the main problem or research question addressed (i.e., what is the big issue at stake) and what are the key elements or logic of the author’s argument (i.e., theoretical/conceptual framework). What are the author’s main results or central claims? From an empirical perspective, what evidence/data does the author offer in support of his/her argument? What conclusions should we draw from his/her work?
In addition to summarizing the readings, you should also engage ‘critically’ with the various texts. Does the author deliver in terms of what she/he sets out to do? Are there problems with the way some of the results are interpreted? Are there problems with some of the underlying assumptions made by the author? Do you see gaps in their logic or reasoning? Do you question or disagree with certain claims made? More broadly, how do the different readings differ in their conceptualization of the problem?

Prior to meeting for the seminar on Fridays, you will have to submit short summaries along with a list of discussion questions for each reading. These should be short and concise: a maximum of 2 pages in length (in total) and handed-in no later than 9:30 am (via email, in WORD format). Following brief oral summaries of the readings, the questions generated will be used to engage with the material in class.

**METHOD OF EVALUATION**

You will be evaluated on (i) your weekly participation in the seminar (20%) and (ii) your short reading summaries/list of discussion questions (15%), (iii) a short mid-term overview of your research topic (10%), (iv) a final presentation (10%) and (v) your final term paper (45%) (guidelines for the final research paper will be discussed in class). In accordance with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

**GENERAL REFERENCES**

Much has been written on the topic of economic inequality over the last decade or so. In addition to the readings listed in the course outline below, the following books and articles serve as good entry-points in the literature for students less familiar with the topic (both within geography and economics). These references provide surveys of the main concepts and central research questions tackled in the field, background as to how ideas and different perspectives have evolved as well as overviews of related contemporary debates. You may wish to consult these from time to time during the semester.


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**COURSE OUTLINE & READINGS SCHEDULE**

**Week 1 (January 12) – Course introduction and overview**

*Key topics*: Discussion of course structure, logistics and expectations. Viewing of “Inequality for all” documentary (by Robert Reich, 2013).

**Week 2 (January 19) – Trajectories of inequality: recent and historical perspectives**

*Key topics*: Setting the scene and taking stock of the state of inequality today. How does it compare to past trends? Distinguishing between within- vs. between-country patterns of inequality.


*Optional readings*


Week 3 (January 26) – Theorizing inequality and its relationship to economic growth

Key topics: Problems of production vs. distribution. What explains the distribution of income? How does inequality relate to economic growth?


Optional readings


Week 4 (February 2) – Why should we care about inequality? Reviewing theories of social justice. Where does a geographical perspective fit-in?

Key topics: Distinguishing between economic vs. social justice. Exploring the meaning of social exclusion. On moral philosophies, ethics, egalitarianism, utilitarianism, libertarianism and Marxism. And where does geography come into play?


Optional readings


**Week 5 (February 9) – More on the causes of inequality**

*Key topics:* What are the main drivers (i.e., determinants) of contemporary patterns of inequality? Sociological, economic and political perspectives.


*Optional readings*


**Week 6 (February 16) – Measuring inequality**

*Key topics:* How is inequality measured? What criteria should be used in selecting indicators of inequality (four key principles to consider)? On the issue of top-coding. Lab session on how to compute indicators of inequality using Stata.


Optional readings


**Week 7 (February 23) – Inequality, taxes and fairness**

Instead of holding our usual seminar on Friday, students are invited to participate in the “Who pays for Canada? Taxes and fairness” conference organized by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. Of particular relevance to the class will be the paper session organized on the theme of *Fairness and inequality: National taxation* (to be held on the Thursday afternoon, Feb. 22nd).

To prepare for this topic, two background readings are assigned (both of which focus on taxation issues within the Canadian context):


**Week 8 (March 2) – On the costs of inequality**

*Key topics:* What are the consequences of inequality? How does place factor in? What about questions of mobility.


Optional readings


*Note:* the last hour of our seminar will be used to discuss progress on your term paper projects. Each student will be asked to provide an overview of the topic (related to the course material) they have chosen for their paper, taking care to outline some of the key references they intend to use to support their
argument. In addition to the short presentation, a 1- to 2-page summary of the proposed research paper is to be handed in at the end of class (more details to follow).

Week 9 (March 9) – McGill study break (no class)

Week 10 (March 16) – Spatial disparities and theories of regional development: A review of the economic geography literature

Key topics: Regional income disparities, convergence/divergence, an overview of models of regional economic growth.


Optional readings


Week 11 (March 23) – No class.

Week 12 (March 30) – From regional to urban geographies: Inequality and the new reality of metropolitan areas in North America

Key topics: How is inequality evolving at the intra-metropolitan level? What are the challenges posed by rising real estate prices and growing household debt burdens? Is there a dark side to innovation?

Florida, R. (2017) *The new urban crisis: How our cities are increasing inequality, deepening segregation, and failing the middle-class – And what we can do about it*, Basic Books (Chapter 7: “Patchwork Metropolis”).


Optional readings


**Week 13 (April 6) – Is there an upside to inequality? The vanishing middle class and “contemporary” arguments for/against inequality**

*Key topics:* is the recent rise in inequality, its causes and consequences, a misdiagnosed problem? Is the idea that the rich are getting richer by making the poor poorer just a myth? What are the key arguments used by the ‘skeptics’ to downplay the problem? What are the perils of ignoring inequality?

Conard, E. (2016) *The Upside of Inequality: How Good Intentions Undermine the Middle Class*, Portfolio/Penguin (selected chapters).


Optional readings


Reeves, R. (2017) *Dream hoarders: How the American upper middle class is leaving everyone else in the dust, why that is a problem and what to do about it*, Brookings Institution Press.


**Week 14 (April 13) – Final presentations**