

**College of Liberal Arts  
Diversity and Inclusion Resource Module  
TOPIC: Social Class  
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## I. Social Class: Introduction and Overview

Social class affects social opportunities and arrangements, economic and political issues, and public policies; it is fundamentally connected to power differentials across all these areas. This module proposes to provide an overview of social class as an analytical concept and social location, to assist faculty with key articles and books to attain a solid background in the topic, and to provide sample activities to teach students about social class. The module will theorize and define class intersectionally, in order to demonstrate the ways that it is constructed in concert with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. The primary focus will be on class in the United States, with some material relating to global contexts as well.

The materials listed below can teach students how to use social class as an analytical concept to examine not only economic arrangements, but also how political decisions are made, the content of public policies, social arrangements, and cultural contexts and constructions. For example, in my classes we explore theories from Marx to Weber to social stratification to understand social class; we consider how issues may be "classed" even when they appear to lack a relationship to social class; we discuss how class may be a lens through which we interpret issues, perhaps without fully understanding and acknowledging our own social locations with regard to class; and we analyze how social class shapes power differentials that influence everything from education policy to housing to family structures.

Given the cultural construction of the United States as "classless," many students may lack the knowledge--and even the language--to assess and analyze how class operates. Research shows that there is a mythology supported by many in the United States that suggests we are a classless society, or at least one where unlimited social mobility renders class meaningless. Thus, class categories do not matter, and do not significantly impact our political, economic, and social lives. Given this mythology, those who struggle economically are likely to be seen as the authors of their own fates, and need only to rely on rugged individualism to change their situations. This mythology also may lead to conflating race and class, rather than perceiving that they are often structured in relation to one another but are not one in the same.

The wide-ranging impact of the Great Recession, increasing income inequality, better and more research on social mobility rates, and the recent Presidential election have in different ways begun to erode the mythology about social class. For example, because of the extent to which middle class and upper middle class people were affected by the recession (e.g. losing homes and retirement savings), the notion that class matters, and that poverty can affect a large number of people, became more mainstream. Research shows that while the official US poverty rate has hovered between 13% and 15% since 2005, poverty and economic precariousness affects a much larger portion of the population: "a third of all people were near poor and poor" in the United States in 2013 (Iceland 2013, 44). In addition, we are experiencing a significant increase in the number of people who are very low-income; approximately 6.6% of households have an income below 50% of the poverty line (Iceland 2013), or roughly \$12,000 annually for a family of four, and approximately 1.5 million U.S. households lived on cash incomes of at most \$2 per day per person in 2011 (Edin and Shaefer, 2015).

Deepening poverty also relates to widening income and wealth inequality. In the United States, economic inequality is more significant than it has been in decades. In comparison to the 34 OECD countries, for example, the United States has the fourth worst income inequality. Research comparing social mobility in the United States and some Western European (wealthy, developed) countries, shows that the U.S. has lower rates of social mobility, particularly for those born into the bottom quintile of incomes than some European countries that were long assumed to have more stagnant social class systems (Jantti, et al, 2006). Such inequality fostered the Occupy Wall Street movement, which continues to publicize the gap between those with the highest incomes and wealth (i.e. the top 1%, or sometimes the top 5% or 10%) and the rest of the country.

Finally, the role of social class in interpreting and understanding the 2016 Presidential election also makes it a timely topic. Analyzing the vote by education and income, for example, demonstrates trends regarding social class shaping vote choice. In addition, the way that the media and the public were surprised by the outcome of the race can be explained in part by the misunderstanding associated with the class status and identification of whites in the upper Midwest states, as well as the consistently low voter turnout among low-income people.

#### Works Cited

Edin, K., and H. L. Shaefer. 2015. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Iceland, J. 2013. *Poverty in America: A Handbook*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jantti, et al, 2006. "American Exceptionalism in a New Light," Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany.

## II. Main Points in Teaching Social Class

1) Introductory material to define concepts is important. I usually start all discussions of social class (even in 400-level courses) with an overview of the definition of social class; a discussion about how to measure it (using, for example, income, wealth, education, occupation, status, and power); one or two typologies of class that offer ways to understand the various class levels; and theoretical approaches to social class. There are many textbooks on social stratification that provide this information. See, for example, Kerbo, H. (2011). *Social Stratification and Inequality: Class Conflict in Historical, Comparative, and Global Perspective, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*. NY: McGraw-Hill.

2) Explore how class is a relative concept; in other words, we usually define class groups in relation to one another and in relation to a sense of what is socially expected and common for most people within a given historical period and country. It's important, in this sense, not to generalize from one country to another (when using typologies of class, for example), and to help students think about how intertwined power differentials are with social class groupings.

3) Social class as a concept encompasses numerous class categories. For example, the following configuration uses the simplest structure:

Upper  
Middle  
Lower

Alternatively, the next configuration uses a more complex and comprehensive structure:

Upper  
Corporate  
Middle (upper middle, middle middle, lower middle)  
Working  
Lower

Clearly, to learn about social class is to explore much more than poverty. It is easy to fall into the trap of focusing mainly on poverty, however, because most research exploring social class is about low-income people, not about the middle or upper classes. There are a few books on the elite and on the working classes, with an increasing number of new books about working classes published since the 2016 election. There are very few books and articles written about the middle class, which tends to be viewed as the norm and as such generally goes unmarked. At the same time, numerous studies demonstrate that most Americans think of themselves as middle class, such that people with incomes ranging from \$25,000 to \$250,000 per year define themselves as middle class. Please also see the first item in Tips and Pitfalls on this topic.

4) Students learn more about social class if you teach it using an intersectional approach, so that they can see how class is structured and shaped by race, gender, age, sexuality, and

dis/ability. Using intersectionality as a purposeful approach to exploring social class helps students understand how race and class, in particular, intertwine, but also the ways in which we sometimes confuse race and class or substitute race as a way to simplify or reinterpret social class inequality. For example, some students may automatically assume that all African-Americans are poor, and that when you refer to low-income populations, you mean African-Americans. This is related to the mythology of class referred to in the introduction as well; because of the myth that class doesn't matter in the U.S., students lack a sophisticated vocabulary of class and the tools to analyze it.

5) Social class can be used as a (or the) category of analysis to study numerous policy arenas, such as education, housing or health policy. If you want to explore public policy in depth and use class as a lens to do so, defining social class and teaching students how to measure it remains an important first step (see main point #1).

### III. Instructor Articles

The literature on social class is massive. Researchers take varied approaches and focus on different questions depending upon their discipline; sociologists, political scientists, economists, geographers, and those using an interdisciplinary perspective all contribute to the field. Thus, the articles listed below barely scratch the surface of the available literature, but this list is designed to provide a sense of the various strands associated with research on social class. In addition, some of the articles listed here can be assigned for student reading, depending upon the level of the class and the amount of time to be devoted to the topic.

**Elwood, S., Lawson, V., & Nowak, S. (2015). Middle-Class poverty politics: Making place, making people. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 105(1), 123-143.**

Explores how middle class actors respond to the Great Recession and heightened fears about their own economic vulnerability. Specifically, the authors study whether rising vulnerability translates into greater defensiveness and class and race boundary making or into a sense of shared understanding and solidarity with those in poverty. The authors do a comparative case study in mixed-income urban neighborhoods in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

**Haymes, S., Vidal de Haymes, M., & Miller, R., editors. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Poverty in the United States*. NY: Routledge.**

This is a comprehensive, edited volume on poverty in the United States and globally. There are 55 articles organized into six sections, which include: poverty in the era of globalization, discourses of poverty, welfare policy and the welfare state, criminalizing the poor, global poverty, and neoliberalism. Some articles would also work well for student reading, with most written in an accessible manner.

**Holosko, M. & Barner, J. (2017). Neoliberal Globalization: Social Welfare Policy and Institutions. In *The Routledge Handbook of Poverty in the United States*. NY: Routledge.**

A useful, quick overview of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (welfare reform) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Provides the essentials of current welfare policy and analyzes it in a global context.

**Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.**

Focused on the "new elite," this book identifies and explores class privilege through a private high school. The book could work for student reading, though it isn't easily divided into chapters, so the entire book probably would need to be assigned.

**Merolla, D. M., & Jackson, O. (2014). Understanding differences in college enrollment: Race, class and cultural capital. *Race and Social Problems*, 6(3), 280-292.**

Explores the role of cultural capital in producing inequalities among American students. Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study, the authors examine and attempt to clarify the relationships among race, social class, cultural capital and 4-year college enrollment. The

article provides a condensed and useful discussion of the meaning of cultural capital as related to social class and race.

**Rothwell, J. T., & Massey, D. S. (2010). Density zoning and class segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas. *Social Science Quarterly*, 91(5), 1123-1143.**

The authors argue that zoning regulations are an important cause of the socioeconomic residential segregation that rose substantially in U.S. cities during the final decades of the 20th century. They explore neighborhood economic segregation and find that metropolitan areas with suburbs that restrict the density of residential construction are more segregated on the basis of income than those with more permissive density zoning regimes. This arrangement perpetuates and exacerbates racial and class inequality in the United States.

**Mink, G. (2002). *Welfare's End*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.**

**Schram, S., Soss, J. & Fording, R. Editors. (2003). *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*. University of Michigan Press.**

Although these books were published about 15 years ago, I include them because they contain key arguments on the impact of race and gender on welfare politics and policy. The roles of gender, race and racism in shaping welfare policy is well researched, and there is an enormous literature on it. These books will introduce you to major themes and authors associated with this body of literature.

**Smith, L., Mao, S. & Deshpande, A. (2016). Talking Across Worlds: Classist Microaggressions and Higher Education. *Journal of Poverty* 20(2), 127-151.**

A qualitative study with graduate students who identify as coming from poor or working class backgrounds. The article explores their experiences with classism in higher education.

**Terriquez, V. (2014). Trapped in the working class? Prospects for the intergenerational (im)mobility of Latino youth. *Sociological Inquiry*, 84(3), 382-411.**

The author examines the mobility trajectories of Latino youth using survey data from California that accounts for the precarious legal status of many 1.5 generation immigrants. Given the low socioeconomic origins of many Latino youth and their correspondingly low 4-year college enrollment rates, only a small proportion will likely enjoy upward mobility through jobs that require a bachelor's degree. Overall, the cohort of Latino youth coming of age during the Great Recession is poised to experience working-class stagnation.

**Wodtke, G. T. (2016). Social class and income inequality in the United States: Ownership, authority, and personal income distribution from 1980 to 2010. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(5), 1375-1415.**

Quantitative analysis using data from the General Social Survey to evaluate various impacts on growth in inequality at the population level. Results indicate that between-class income differences grew by about 60% since the 1980s; changes in the relative size of different social classes had a small dampening effect and growth in between-class income differences had a large inflationary effect on trends in personal income inequality.



#### IV. Student Articles

**Halpern-Meekin, S. et al. (2015). *It's Not Like I'm Poor: How Working Families Make Ends Meet in a Post-Welfare World*. Oakland: University of California Press.**

Using a mixed methods approach, the authors explain and analyze the Earned Income Tax Credit, a primary anti-poverty social program for working poor families. The number of people who qualify for the EITC dwarfs those who qualify for TANF (i.e. "welfare"), yet few students recognize or understand this program.

**Iceland, J. (2013). *Poverty in America, third edition*. Oakland: University of California Press.**  
**Schiller, B. (2007). *The Economics of Poverty and Discrimination*. Prentice Hall (new edition to come out in 2020).**

These are textbooks that address the basics of poverty, social class, and policy responses to poverty. The first is by a sociologist whose analysis is more leftist and the second by an economist whose analysis is more conservative. Iceland's book also focuses on public policy and is useful for a political science class. There are numerous books of this type that can be assigned for student reading or background reading for an instructor. I point out these examples in order to demonstrate that there are numerous versions of such textbooks available.

**Kendall, D., (2005). *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield.**

This book explores media representations of multiple class groupings, including the middle class, low-income people, and the elite. Selecting one or two chapters to assign is relatively easy since each stands on its own. It's somewhat difficult to find readings on the middle class, so I included it although it's a bit dated in the media examples it draws upon.

**Williams, J.C. (2017). *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.**

Written as a response to -- and explanation of -- the class dimensions of the 2016 election, this book focuses on the white working class in the Midwest. It is written in a conversational tone and contains good statistics and interesting insights.

**Yates, D., editor. (2007). *More Unequal: Aspects of Class in the United States*. NY: Monthly Review Press.**

Since this book uses a neo-Marxist approach to exploring class, students can read it alongside books that employ a social stratification approach in order to think about class using a variety of theories. It also contains several personal narratives and short, accessible chapters.

## V. Sample Classroom Activities

(Please see citations for articles/books associated with the following activities below)

1) One of the simplest and most effective activities involves students in exploring income inequality by using materials to represent income and wealth that students can see, feel, or eat. There are many variations of this, including using paper plates, m-n-m's, or rice. The most sophisticated are the "hunger dinners" which assign students a certain social class role randomly when they arrive, and then food is divided based on social class and/or income. Please see a short description of one of these activities in the excerpt from Schwalbe, *Rigging the Game* (citation and page numbers below).

2) There are a number of activities that involve playing either a trivia game or Monopoly-like game where players start the game with unequal resources and are treated unequally during the game. Please see the following articles, one by Norris and the other by Jessup, that describe two of these activities. Jessup suggests that this activity is designed to help students: "(1) understand the structural constraints that govern economic choices; (2) recognize that economic failure is usually not linked to individual or character defects; and, (3) realize that social inequality is rooted in economic position, power, and the availability of resources" (Jessup, 2001).

Jessup, M. (2001). Sociopoly: Life on the Boardwalk. *Teaching Sociology*, 29, 102-109.

Norris, D. (2013). Beat the Bourgeoisie: A Social Class Inequality and Mobility Simulation Game. *Teaching Sociology*, 41(4) 334–345.

Schwalbe, M. (2008). *Rigging the Game: How Inequality is Reproduced in Everyday Life*. NY: Oxford University Press, excerpt pages 1-4.

## VI. Media Resources

**The End of Poverty? (2008) (Cinema Libre Studio):** Filmed in Africa and Latin America, The End of Poverty features insights on global poverty from: Nobel prize winners in Economics, Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz; acclaimed authors Susan George, Eric Toussaint, John Perkins, Chalmers Johnson; university professors William Easterly and Michael Watts; government ministers such as Bolivia's Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera and the leaders of social movements in Brazil, Venezuela, Kenya and Tanzania.

Available via Kanopy: <https://calpoly-kanopystreaming-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/video/end-poverty>

**Crossing the American Crises: From Collapse to Action (2010):** Filmed in 2008 and 2010, this documentary explores the impact of the recession on ordinary people. Featuring the Vermont Worker's Center; LA's Bus Riders Union; Santa Fe's local business Alliance; Oakland's Green Jobs Now; Baltimore's United Workers; and American workers, truck drivers, farmers, homeless, ex-felons, minorities, natural disaster survivors, indigenous, immigrants, and residents from coast to coast--covering nearly 40 states across the U.S.

Available via Kanopy: <https://calpoly-kanopystreaming-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/video/crossing-american-crises-collapse-action>

**Homeless: The Motel Kids of Orange County (2010) (HBO):** Explores the world of children who reside in discounted motels within walking distance of Disneyland, living in limbo as their families struggle to survive in one of the wealthiest regions of America. The parents of motel kids are often hard workers who don't earn enough to own or rent homes. As a result, they continue to live week-to-week in motels, hoping against hope for an opportunity that might allow them to move up in the O.C. The toll of this lifestyle on their children is severe. Though the community tries to provide adequate education and food, the day-to-day lives of motel kids are often a numbing exercise in frustrating constraints and ever-diminishing expectations. Available via HBO Now and Amazon

**Why Poverty? (2012) (PBS) [8 episode series]:** Running about an hour each, each of the 8 episodes included in this series by PBS explores poverty through a unique lens, and evaluates potential responses to poverty around the world. Episodes range in focus from the exploitation of African natural resources, abuse on Wall Street and the financial crisis of 2008, global disparities in access to healthcare, and the function of higher education in China, where access to college grows both increasingly important and increasingly inaccessible.

Episodes:

- Park Avenue: Money, Power & the American Dream: 740 Park Avenue, Manhattan, is one of the most exclusive addresses in the world, home to some of the richest Americans, the 1% of the 1%. Ten minutes to the north, across the Harlem River, is the other Park Avenue, in the South Bronx. Here, unemployment runs at 19% and half the population need food stamps.

- Poor US: An Animated History of Poverty: For the whole of modern civilization, humans have attempted and failed to eradicate poverty. What can we learn from generations of failed efforts? Using a combination of animation, archival material, live action, anecdote, and humor, *Poor Us* looks at mankind's periodic efforts to alleviate poverty with the hope that we will get a better sense of how to move forward.
- Education, Education: In China, education is considered the only way out of poverty. But as the nation's higher education system has largely been privatized by for-profit companies, the future for millions of students is bleak. College is less accessible to Chinese youth than ever before, and without it, they are often shut out of well-paid employment opportunities. What will it mean for coming generations and the future of China?
- Give Us the Money: Documentary taking an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at 30 years of Bob Geldof and Bono's campaign against poverty. Their work has made them icons of aid and even garnered them Nobel Peace Prize nominations, but what impact has it really had on Africa? Through archive footage and candid new interviews with key players including Geldof, Bono and Bill Gates, the film re-examines three decades of unprecedented campaigns and scrutinizes the effectiveness of celebrity-led activism.
- Stealing Africa: Describes the tax system employed by multinational companies in Africa. The film looks at a village in Switzerland with a very low tax rate and very wealthy residents. But it receives more tax revenue than it can use. This is largely thanks to one resident - Ivan Glasenberg, CEO of Glencore, whose copper mines in Zambia are not generating a large bounty tax revenue for the Zambians. Zambia has the third largest copper reserves in the world, but 60% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day and 80% are unemployed. Based on original research into public documents, the film tells the story of global trade.
- Land Rush: Rich, land-hungry nations are leasing Africa's best farmland. Is it a crisis, or simply economic development? Screened in more than 70 countries, this hour-long documentary tells the story of an industrial sugar plantation being built in rural Mali, West Africa. Digging into questions of economic development and land rights, the film follows characters who are trying to escape poverty without forsaking their traditional way of life.

Available via PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/show/why-poverty/>

**Poor Kids (2012) (PBS Frontline)**: Frontline spent months following three young girls who are growing up against the backdrop of their families' struggles against financial ruin. At a time when one in five American kids' lives below the poverty line, *Poor Kids* is an intimate portrait of the economic crisis as it's rarely seen, through the eyes of children.

Available via Frontline: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/poor-kids/>

**Two American Families (2013) (PBS Frontline):** Since 1992, Bill Moyers has been following the story of two ordinary, hard-working families in Milwaukee — one black, one white — as they battle to keep from sliding into poverty. A remarkable portrait of perseverance, *Two American Families* raises unsettling questions about the changing nature of the U.S. economy and the fate of a declining middle class.

Available via Frontline: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/two-american-families/>

**American Winter (2013) (HBO):** American Winter is a documentary feature film that shines a light on the dramatic personal stories behind the country's worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Years after the recession began, millions of families are struggling to meet their basic needs, and many formerly middle class families are finding themselves in need of assistance for the first time in their lives. Meanwhile, the social safety net that was created to help people in difficult times has been weakened by massive budget cuts, creating a perfect storm of greater need and fewer resources to help families in trouble. Filmed over the course of one winter in Portland, Oregon, American Winter presents an intimate and emotionally evocative snapshot of the state of our economy as it is playing out in many American families.

Available via HBO Now, Amazon, iTunes

**Inequality for All (2013) (72 Productions):** The film examines widening income inequality in the United States. The film is presented by American economist, author and Professor Robert Reich, and is based on his 2010 book *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future*. Reich distills the story through the lens of widening income inequality—currently at historic highs—and explores what effects this increasing gap has not only on the U.S. economy but also American democracy itself. At the heart of the film is a simple question: What is a good society and what role does the widening income gap play in the deterioration of the nation's economic health?

Available via Netflix

**Growing Up Poor (2013) (BBC):** 2-part series which follows young adults living in poverty in the UK, documenting the support (or lack thereof) which they receive from the government and how they manage to survive on marginal incomes. Special attention paid to the process of getting, and maintaining a stable job, teen motherhood, and reentering society after time in the juvenile justice system. The first episode looks exclusively at the experiences of young women living in poverty, and the second follows only young men.

Available via YouTube

Part one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhB5Ry8YNIU>

Part two: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy\\_bBVUFOZs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy_bBVUFOZs)

**Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert (2014) (HBO):** Filmed over the course of one year in Chattanooga, Tenn., *Paycheck To Paycheck* follows Katrina Gilbert, a 30-year-old mother of three who works as a certified nursing assistant in an extended-care facility while striving to address her own health-care issues. Overworked, underpaid, uninsured and lacking support, she chooses daily between purchasing her own medication and paying for the

needs of her three children, which often leaves her struggling to make ends meet. Despite these obstacles, Gilbert works to better her circumstances, applying for college courses that could raise her income. But circumstances often leave her slipping backwards, wondering if she will ever truly be able to get ahead.

Available via HBO Now, Amazon, iTunes

**20/20 My Reality: A Hidden America (2017):** In this video, ABC News reports on the shrinking middle class and the growing economic disparity between the wealthy and the rest of the population. Diane Sawyer investigates the working class and how the "American Dream" appears more untenable than ever.

Available via ABC: <http://abc.go.com/shows/2020/episode-guide/2017-01/13-11317-my-reality-a-hidden-america>

## VII. Tips and Pitfalls

1) In teaching about social class, it is essential to teach about the full scope of class and class positions. Thus, it's important to avoid the notion that only poor people are classed, which is the category most students assume is the root of social class. Given that a broad range of Americans identify themselves as middle class, sometimes only low- and high-income people are perceived as having a class and being shaped by their class positions, while the vast middle is unaffected. To address this tendency, offer a typology of class that demonstrates the various class positions and some of the criteria used to define class positions.

2) Do not use course activities that require students to identify and explore their own class positions in front of/with other students. There are many varieties of such activities online, but I have found that they do not work well at Cal Poly; students feel isolated and/or singled out. This is true even in diverse classrooms at Cal Poly. I've used these exercises at other institutions, and they've worked well. My sense from students is that the culture at Cal Poly makes it difficult for them to feel safe engaging in these activities, no matter how safe you've worked to make your own classroom. The only method I use to engage students in talking about class from a personal perspective is through reading classmates' anonymous personal narratives. Even in this case, however, they're given choices about what to write about (so they don't have to write about class), and they don't have to share their narratives with their classmates at all if they prefer not to.

3) Don't be surprised if students are slow to participate in a discussion about class. They may be as uncomfortable talking about class as they can be talking about race. They may be afraid of offending others, or simply feel that discussing class is somehow off limits.

4) Be aware that students often use income as a corollary for social class. To address this tendency, you can look at and discuss income brackets initially. Emphasize that income explains just a segment of what we mean by class, and show that income is not a satisfactory way to measure class by bringing in education, occupation, status, etc.