

Harvard University

Expository Writing 20: Culture and Politics of Inequality

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Office Hours: Online or outside if weather permits, M, W: 3-4pm

The 21st century bears witness to alarming trends in social and economic inequality. Major disparities in income, wealth, and opportunity underlie our anxieties about structural violence and climate change, which disproportionately affects the [global south](#). Continual reports on the United States' racial wealth gap coupled with the recent Black Lives Matter protests beg the question: How long can we settle for incremental solutions to such alarmingly imminent problems? We will begin by interrogating the Enlightenment philosophy of Rousseau in [Discourse on the Origins of Inequality](#), which attempts to understand how inequality manifests from the moral complications and social conflicts of civil society. Next, we will examine [The Wretched of the Earth](#), a landmark work of political philosophy by the psychiatrist and revolutionary fighter Frantz Fanon. We will also explore how mass incarceration and contemporary forms of structural violence stem from colonialism and what one historian of the [Black Radical tradition](#), Cedric J. Robinson, calls racial capitalism. In our final unit, we will read literature from the natural and social sciences to enter a debate about how global capital stokes the kind of human activity that has led to a troubling new geological epoch, the [anthropocene](#). Throughout the course, we will pursue rigorous answers to the following questions, among others: What responsibilities do we share for increasingly fragmented social and economic spheres when many forms of inequality are at a century high? To what extent is the violence waged by states and private interests endurable or unacceptable? In what ways has the pandemic affected inequality? What must we do if climate change continues to outpace our timelines for environmental solutions?

Class Objectives for Learning Outcomes:

1. Communicate an effective argument through evidence-based writing
2. Evaluate and critically assess sources through attribution and citation
3. Analyze and synthesize ideas from multiple sources across academic disciplines
4. Develop strategies for productive inquiry leading to evidence-based writing
5. Engage a methodical writing process emphasizing research and revision
6. Learn how to challenge, reconsider, and enhance ideas through class discussions
7. Study and implement ideas and theories bridging different academic disciplines
8. Develop one's sense of ethical, philosophical, and political beliefs

Unit One: The Origins of Inequality

In our opening unit we will read Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. As an Enlightenment-era philosopher, Rousseau's work builds upon prior theories about individual liberty, laws, and justice. First published in 1755, his *Second Discourse* was received with some scandal in Europe, but its impact reverberates into contemporary discussions on the nature of inequality and how we as an organized society should confront it. We will also unpack some recent scholarship that complicates the historical record of inequality, paying some attention to the "Indigenous Critique" of Western society. Our objective is to write an essay whose main focus interrogates Rousseau's viewpoints, sourcing from the original text, as well as some contemporary ones to supplement a critical analysis.

Unit One Texts:

- *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, David Graeber & David Wengrow, 2021. (Excerpts)
- *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1755. (Excerpts)

Unit Two: Colonialism, Capitalism, and Systemic Violence

Humanities and social science scholars are in wide agreement that much of contemporary inequality stems from the long-standing processes of colonialism and capitalism. If violence can be understood in different forms, structural, systemic, interpersonal, emanating from above, below, or side to side in societal castes, how does the emancipatory struggle pan out? In this unit we will consider such questions by studying a brief history of the African Diaspora, colonialism, and contemporary forms of structural violence and capitalism. Our goal is to write a paper whose original argument develops connections between the unit texts.

Unit Two Texts:

- *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander, 2011 (Excerpts)
- "On Violence," excerpted from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon, 1961
- "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," Barbara J. Fields, 1990
- "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond The New Jim Crow," James Forman Jr. *New York University Law Review*. Vol. 87. April 2012. pp.101-146
- *Black Marxism*. Cedric J. Robinson, 1983 (Excerpts)

Unit Three: The Anthropocene and Capitalocene

There is no problem more fundamental than anthropogenic climate change. The majority of environmental scientists agree that the longterm stakes are dire. In the near term, our ecological imbalances will cause fires, floods, heat waves, and rising seas. Many will endure food shortages, refugee crises, and exacerbated inequality. Social scientists project that the short-sighted choices of our imbalanced society will fall unduly on the most impoverished. In this unit we will map intersections between political economy and climate change. Our goal is to interrogate the relationship between our politico-economic choices and our environmental fallout, completing the semester with a polished research paper sourced across the disciplines.

Unit Three Texts:

- “The Extractive Circuit.” Ajay-Singh Chaudhary. *The Baffler*. no.60. Nov. 21, 2021.
- “The Capitalocene.” Benjamin Kunkel. *London Review of Books*, 2017
- “Rent Seeking and the Making of an Unequal Society,” excerpted from *The Price of Inequality*, Joseph Stiglitz, 2012

Grading:

Class Engagement: 10%

Canvas Posts: 5%

Paper 1: 20%

Paper 2: 25 %

Paper 3 Annotated Bib: 10%

Paper 3: 30 %

Canvas Posts:

Many weeks you will have a Canvas post due. These will be announced ahead of time. Don't let them get away from you; they're worth 5% of your final grade. They offer a chance to organize your thoughts in preparation for class and your papers. They are informal, but they should still be structured, organized, and represent your most insightful thoughts for the day's reading.