In this course we will take the work of John Rawls as setting out a particular interpretation of a widely held view of justice in modern political thinking, one premised on some conception of human equality and a commitment to equal rights and equal consideration of everyone’s interests. In the first part of the class we will critically examine his theory, with special attention to how it is grounded, to the specific principles of justice Rawls puts forward, to the arguments for these principles, and the implications of his theory for the institutional structure of a democratic society. Rawls famously holds that everyone (in a pluralist society – more on that later) is entitled “to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with same scheme of liberties for all,” and that social and economic inequalities must be limited in important ways. During the rest of the term we will critically assess each of these principles by drawing out their implications for the problems we face in contemporary society. Although we will take Rawls as our point of departure, our critical assessment will not be narrowly focused on his work, but on the broader ideas of equality, including especially the idea of equal rights, that are central to modern politics and political theorizing. The advantage of beginning with Rawls is not only that he is a preeminent thinker but also that he offers deeply reasoned accounts of these issues, forcing us to address these key ideas in one of their most powerful formulations.

We will begin with the question of social and economic inequalities, asking first why or even whether social and economic equality is a value, and then we will consider its feasibility, asking why inequality has been growing for the last 30 or 40 years and what can be done about it. The rest of the semester will take up the issue of equal rights, and whether a “scheme of equal basic liberties” can be “fully adequate” to deal with issues of culture, gender, and racial difference, topics that will take up about half of the semester. The agenda for the final meeting of the semester will be presentations of student research topics.

The class meets as a seminar for three hours on Mondays. We will take one short (5 or 6 minute) break in the middle of the class. Except for real emergencies, students must not leave and return to the class except during the break.

Books:

The following book will be available through Broad Street Books and will be on reserve at Olin:

Anthony Atkinson, *Inequality*, Harvard UP, hardcover, 9780674504769
Sarah Song, *Justice, Gender, and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, Cambridge UP, 9780521697590
Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Princeton UP, paper, 9780691158112

**Course Expectations and Requirements:** A class is a cooperative endeavor, in which we work together to explore and enhance our understanding of a subject. Each of us brings a unique background and perspective to the class, and each contributes by engaging with one another and with the readings and other class material. We need to listen sympathetically and respectfully in order to understand each other’s concerns and points of view. At the same time, we need to engage critically, raising questions to clarify and deepen the discussion. That will only work if everyone comes to class having done and thought about the reading and prepared both to express their own ideas and to listen thoughtfully to others. Thinking about the readings means being prepared to state and explain the key concepts used by an author, to outline the main thesis or theses in two or three concise sentences, to set out the core argument(s) of the text(s), and to present your own evaluation of its persuasiveness.

I have listed the readings for each meeting of class in the syllabus. If you have any question about what you should have read before a particular class meeting you should get in touch with me. I have tried to make the readings manageable, but inevitably there is some variation from week to week in both the length of the readings and in their levels of difficulty.

In addition to readings and class participation, each student will write seven “reaction” papers, submit a proposal for the term paper, make an oral presentation on their term paper, and submit a 15-20 pp term paper. The term paper may be on any topic bearing on the questions raised by the class and must draw on sources beyond the required readings. A short description of the topic and bibliography will be due by Saturday, November 21, at 11 AM and the term paper is due on Tuesday, December 17, at 5 PM. Late papers will be downgraded one letter grade per day. All papers are to be submitted as e-mail attachments in Word or Rich Text Format.

Reaction papers are 2 pages in length (they may go over 2, but no more than 3 pages), and must engage issue(s) raised by the readings for a particular week. They are due no later than 6 PM on the Sunday before the class in which the readings will be discussed, and must be submitted electronically. We’ll use these papers to structure at least part of our class discussions. Late papers will NOT be accepted for any reason, including emergencies. Counting the first meeting of class (for which readings have been assigned), there will be twelve opportunities to do a reaction paper, so it’s advisable NOT to skip writing them early in the semester, thus running the risk of not being able to do one towards the end of the term because of an emergency. You are free to do more than the seven required; if you do more than seven, the lowest grade will be dropped in computing the average grade for this part of the class. The term paper will constitute 50% of the grade for the class, the oral presentation 10%, and the reaction papers 40%. The final grade may be adjusted up by up to 2/3rds of a letter grade, or down by 1/3rd of a letter grade, to reflect class participation.

Papers will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. analytical rigor (logic, precision, clarity of argument, consideration of counterarguments, etc.);
2. originality or creativity;
3. scholarship (accurate representation of authors cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc);
4. mechanics (quality of prose, grammar, spelling, citation of sources, etc.);
All work is to be done in accordance with the Honor Code.

For my part, I am committed to being accessible in and outside of the classroom. I will hold regular office hours and am available to meet at other times by appointment; you should feel free to contact me by e-mail, and I will get back to you within a reasonable amount of time. I will also make every effort to read your papers quickly and to provide constructive feedback on your work. I am happy to meet or correspond with you about your ideas before you write a paper, and to read outlines and drafts. I also promise to be demanding but not crazy in assigning grades. A paper in the “B” range is a good paper: it will be well argued with a clear thesis, showing a strong command of the materials of the class, and will be well written. An “A” paper is an excellent paper: it will have the strengths of a “B” paper but to a higher degree, and it will reflect original and creative thinking about the issues. A paper in the “C” range is one that does not adequately meet one of the first three criteria.

Disability Resources: Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible.

Syllabus: Journal articles can be found in the “quick links” folder under “articles, journals & databases” on the library homepage; the journal locator is about halfway down the page when you click the “articles, etc.” link. Readings marked with an asterisk * are on e-reserve; the password for this course is govt395. All books for the course are on reserve in Olin.

Week 1 (September 7): Justice, history, and political liberalism:


Week 2 (September 14): The two principles of justice and their derivation:

Rawls, Parts II and III.

Week 3 (September 21): Public Reason, the basic structure, and stability:

Rawls, Parts IV and V
Week 4 (September 28): Inequality I: Is inequality a problem?

A. Not if rewards are deserved


B. Equality is not important in itself


C. Equality is conducive to human well-being


Week 5 (October 5): Inequality II: Recent trends


Week 6 (October 12): Inequality III: What can be done?

Atkinson, chs 4 through “The Way Forward” (pp. 113-308).

Week 7 (October 19): Difference Ia: Can “justice as fairness” accommodate culture and gender difference?

Review Rawls on the family in JasF and in “Idea of Public Reason.”

Week 8 (November 2): Difference Ib:

Week 9 (November 9): Difference IIa: Can “justice as fairness” accommodate racial difference?


Week 10 (November 16): Difference II b:


Week 11 (November 23): Difference IIc:

Anderson, chs 5 - 9 (89-191)  

Week 12 (November 30): Religion and public reason


Week 13 (December 7): Term paper presentations

**Term paper due Tuesday, December 17, by 5 PM** (by e-mail attachment in Word or RTF).