Pos 500 Seminar in Political Theory: Political Theory and Equality
Peter Breiner

This course will focus on how we should understand equality and the role of politics in realizing it or preventing its achievement. But this course is not merely about equality as a concept. It will assume that the differing attitudes toward equality across its many meanings continue to define the political conflicts between right and left and all positions in between. Thus we will deal with equality in two ways in this seminar: first as a principle of democratic citizenship—political equality; and second as a principle that defines distributive justice. In examining the first approach we will ask the following questions: what do we mean by political equality—political rights, voting, active influence on agenda setting and decision-making? What kinds of distribution follow from the notion that we are all equal citizens? Is the demand for political equality expansive so that it affects all areas of political and social life? We will be particularly concerned with how this term affects how we think about the economy and citizen inclusion. We will then examine the same problems from the vantage point of theories of justice (especially that of John Rawls). As we examine both political and justice-driven theories of equality, we will try to keep in mind how our thinking about each of these theories changes when viewed within contexts of political conflict.

Of course, equality is an empty concept unless we specify equality of what. For us the “what” consists of several things: equality with regard to political rights, political membership, and political resources; equality with regard to the distribution of income and assets, and life chances; equality with regard respect and dignity; equality with respect to legal treatment and claims; and equality with respect to moral standing.

As for the right-left distinction, we will go back to a rather traditional way of defining this spectrum of political positions: namely, as we move right politics aims at transferring inequalities of circumstance or endowment to the distribution of economic, political and social goods. As we move left, politics aims toward greater equality in all the same dimensions. In addition, the right-left distinction rotates around whether the market should be considered a mechanism for such distribution. Somewhere between these positions lies the whole debate on merit and desert and whether it makes sense to distribute fundamental goods on this basis. Hopefully, we will spend a good part of the seminar debating both the meaning of equality, what forms of distribution should follow by adopting one of its meanings, and whether right and left should be understood in its terms.

Booklist:
I. Egalitarianism as concept—what do we mean by equality? (September 7)
   Bernard Williams, “The Idea of Equality” in *Problems of Self* (Blackboard)
   David Miller, “Equality and Justice,” ch. 11 of *Principles of Social Justice*. (Blackboard)

   Recommended:

II. Egalitarianism based on status, power, and citizenship. Democracy, Political Equality and the Market

   A. Political equality vs. the Market. (Sept 14)


      Recommended:
      Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter*

   C. Political Equality and Effective Participation vs. Pluralism (Sept 28)
      Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, chs. 1,2, 8, *9,* 12-14, 15-16, 18 (251-253), 20-21, 22-23*

   Paper on political equality and social justice date to be determined.

III. Analytical approaches to equality and inequality:

   A. Liberal Left Egalitarianism and Justice—the problem of desert.
      John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*
      1. (The Principles of Justice) sections 1-3, 5 10-15; (equality) 16-17, 48, 67; (The original position) 4, 20-26, 29, 40; (Equality of liberty) 31-33 39; (Political Justice, Political Constitutions, and Equality of Political Participation and its limits) 36-37. (October 5—finish Dahl and start Rawls)
2. (Justice, Equality and Political Economy) 41-43, (attack on merit as basis for
economic distribution) 48; (Summing up–a well-ordered society and its justification) 69,
87.

(October 19)

**Second paper on Rawls and equality due date to be determined**

**B. Luck Egalitarianism and its problems (October 26)**

Recommended:

**IV. Socialism and Equality (November 2)**

Recommended:
R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (selection on Blackboard)

**V. Adequacy of Marx and Rawls as answer to Luck and Status Egalitarianism (November 9)**

G. A. Cohen, *If You’re and Egalitarian, Why are you so Rich*, chs 1-3 (pp. 1-57);
chs. 6-10 (101-179)

Third paper on luck egalitarianism and its critics or the socialist notion of equality due
date to be determined.

**VI. Piketty and the Problem of Income Inequality: General Tendency versus Political Intervention**

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*

a. “*Intro (pp. 1-35); *chap 1 (pp. 39-71); ch 3 113-139; (recommended ch 5);* 
*ch 6 (199-234); ch 7 (pp. 237-265); ch 8 (p. 271-274, 291-298); ch 10* (336-
358, 368-376)—though recommend all of ch 8. *(November 16)*
b. Recommended ch 12 [“Global Inequality of Wealth in the Twenty-First Century”]; ch 14 [“Rethinking the Progressive Income Tax”] (pp. 493-514); Recommended ch 15 [A Global Tax on Capital]; “Conclusion” (pp. 571-577).

*Pay special attention. (November 23)

In reading Piketty give some thought to whether the political equality driven or the justice driven approach is more appropriate in evaluating his account of the sources of inequality of wealth and income.

VII. Angus Deaton and the Problem of Inequality on Health and Life Chances (November 30)


VIII. Branko Milanovic and the Problem of Global Inequality: Income Distribution and the Citizenship Premium (December 7)

Branko Milanovic, Global Inequality chs.1, 3, 5 (on Blackboard, though the book is worth owning)

Larger research paper 16-18 pages due at end of finals week.

Course Requirements

1. Each member of the seminar will have to give at least one presentation on the readings on a question that I will pose I will select volunteers from week to week. I am also considering having a different format for presentations in which one person gives an argument for the reading of the week and another presents a criticism of it.

Your presentation should have at least three components: 1) it should lay out the core underlying assumptions of the argument you are discussing; 2) it should discuss how the argument fits in with the theme of the course as well as arguments we have already discussed—does it attack, refute, complement previous arguments; 3) and it should critically assess the strengths and weakness of the argument both conceptually and empirically. This last requirement means that you should close your presentation by doing one of two things: you should either a) present your own argument on the strength or weakness of the one we are reading or b) pose a set of questions that the reading provokes that you think we should discuss.

2. There will be a series of three papers of 6-8 pages apiece in which you will be asked to clarify some problem in the readings. I will assign the topics and the papers as we go along: one paper will be on political equality and social justice. The second paper will be on Rawls and. The third paper will either on luck egalitarianism, equal opportunity, and its critics or on the socialist debate on equality. Finally there will be a larger research paper 15-18 pages on a topic of your choice due during finals week going deeper into one of the problems of equality or one of the arguments on equality discussed in the class. As the class goes on you should think about the topic you might want to write about. Please discuss the topic with me by the 10th week of class—that is by the week of November 14-18.

The three smaller papers will count 20% a piece. The larger paper will count 30% and 10% will of the grade will be for participation and presentations.
Office Hours
I shall have office hours uptown in HU B16 from Tu Th 1:15-2:15. I also will be available in Milne 204 on Wednesdays from 2-3:30 or at other times by appointment. I can be reached at 442-5277 or at pbreiner@albany.edu

Some Older and More Recent Debates on Equality:
Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago).
Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books).
Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances*
Anthony Atkinson, *Inequality*
Philip van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All*