‘Stuff’ of inequality: interrogating the material traces of social hierarchies, past and present

*Freshman Seminar, New York University—Spring 2018*

**instructor:** Andrew Dufton  
**meeting:** T 2–4:30 pm  
**email:** TBD  
**location:** TBD  
**office:** TBD  
**office hours:** TBD

We are the 99%! Black Lives Matter! These rallying cries bring inequality to the front-and-center of western political and media discourses. Yet a social system dividing the haves and have-nots is hardly a modern phenomenon. As a discipline dedicated both to the study of ‘stuff’ and understanding long-term cultural change, archaeology can make a unique contribution to these debates. This seminar considers injustice diachronically and on a global scale, examining ways in which the material world is created by—and creates—social divisions.

Inequality has a long history (and prehistory), and archaeologists across periods and regions have shown a consistent interest in tracing social hierarchy, division, and power dynamics. This course begins with an introduction to the importance of the material world of ‘stuff’ and a look at the earliest examples of hierarchy and egalitarianism. The subsequent weeks offer a thematic focus on the intersection of the many different phenomena that contribute to social differentiation, such as race and ethnicity, gender, slavery, colonialism, or class. Each seminar covers a theoretical introduction to the weekly theme, and two case studies drawn from sites across the globe and dates ranging from prehistory to the present. The final weeks consider archaeology itself, considering the ways that fieldwork and museum practices make the discipline complicit in current systems of power.

Tackling the various aspects of inequality requires the collective input from a number of different voices and backgrounds, and this class is structured to focus largely on group discussion and collaborative effort. Regular written assignments rely on the ‘stuff’ left behind to understand current protests, explore the physical dimensions of social unrest, point out examples of inequality on campus and across New York, and create alternate narratives of the groups often forgotten in historical accounts. Throughout the class there will be an unwavering focus on how the material world studied by archaeologists—a world of objects, buildings, and landscapes—is both impacted by and implicit in the creation and maintenance of systems of inequality and injustice.

**Learning goals**

- Introduction to historical approaches to social inequality, with a particular focus on the role of material culture in past and present systems of power
- Development of shared terminology for discussions of inequality in an archaeological context
- Critical assessment of existing academic and popular media relating to the past to insert traditionally underrepresented communities
- Critical assessment of archaeology as discipline to understand how teaching, field, and museum practices contribute to a lack of diversity
Grade Breakdown

Written assignment I (250 words) 10%
Written assignment II (1000 words) 15%
Written assignment III
  First draft (1250 words) 10%
  Peer feedback 10%
  Class presentation 15%
  Final submission (2500 words) 20%
Online discussion contributions 10%
Class participation and attendance 10%

Course Activities

Written assignment I — Picturing inequality on campus (250 words, due 5pm, Feb. 9th):
What does the manifestation of inequality on NYU’s campus look like to you? Use a single photo and extended caption text of no more than 250 words to capture an aspect of campus inequality from your own perspective. Pictures can have people in them, if necessary, but the focus of the image should be firmly on materials and not on any individual or group. The text should address concisely what we are seeing, why you selected this image, and how you think the physical fabric of the university demonstrates and perhaps creates inequality between students, staff, or the local community.

Written assignment II — Exploring the stuff left behind (1000 words, due 5pm, Mar. 2nd):
Using either an example of modern inequality in action (e.g. the Syrian refugee crisis, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, the socioeconomic or racial segregation of urban communities, etc.), or a public response to systems of injustice (e.g. the Black Lives Matter or Occupy movements, the Arab Spring uprisings, protests against the Standing Rock pipeline, etc.), discuss the material traces left by such events. What are the physical signs of modern inequality? How does the material world contribute to these crises? What stuff might survive after the event? And what do these materials tell us that might not be represented in dominant (largely written) narratives?

Written assignment III — Challenging existing representations:
Use the material record (buildings, objects, landscapes) to craft a more inclusive archaeological narrative about a traditionally underrepresented group (slaves, ethnic minorities, women, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ, etc.). The assignment is deliberately open in geographical and chronological scope—topics can be drawn from case studies covered in class, or from elsewhere. Possible examples could include a critique of local museum display, re-questioning a widely-accepted academic narrative, challenging dominant media or public discourses, or a discussion of an online representation of the past. Successful assignments will include both a analysis of the status quo and the heavy use of material culture to suggest alternative interpretations.

The final project will be undertaken in stages to provide regular feedback and produce a more complete result:

• Paper proposal. Meet with instructor to discuss project topic the week of March 5th
'Stuff' of inequality

- **First draft.** A first draft (at least 1250 words) outlining assignment structure, arguments, and key sources. **Due Friday, March 23rd at 5pm**

- **Peer feedback.** Students will each be expected to provide anonymous, constructive and detailed feedback on the first draft of THREE of their peers. **Due Friday, April 13th at 5pm**

- **Class presentation.** A 10-minute presentation of the research project on the final day of classes, **May 1st**.

- Final draft (2500 words). **Due Friday, May 11th at 5pm**

**Online discussion contributions:** Many current discussions on global inequality are occurring, for better or worse, in the online realm. Students are expected to actively participate in online discussions for the class on a weekly basis by contributing at least TWO posts per week to the NYU Classes forum. Contributions could include questions on the weekly reading material; references to current news or events; popular cultural references connecting to the course themes; links to online materials, social media, or opinion pieces; or responses to comments from other class members.

**Class participation and attendance:** Issues of inequality can only be successfully addressed through a productive and open discussion amongst all members of the class, drawing on our collective experiences and differing backgrounds. Regular attendance and active participation is essential. All assigned readings for a given date must be completed **BEFORE** class, and students should come to class prepared to discuss with ideas or questions relating to the weekly content.

**Discussing difficult content in a classroom setting**

Archaeology is an inherently collaborative discipline, and this spirit of collaboration is needed to tackle head-on the complex and multi-faceted issue of inequality in a classroom setting. Throughout the course we will be dealing with narratives of the past that can be both subjective and contentious, and as such may be disturbing or even traumatizing to some students. I am happy to discuss any concerns you may have before any subjects are discussed in class. Similarly, if you ever want to share your personal reactions to course materials—with me individually or with the class as a whole—such discussions are welcomed as a particularly appropriate and helpful part of our shared intellectual undertaking.

Students are also actively encouraged to question the motives and backgrounds of the authors of materials we will read, and even of my position as instructor. However, given that there are no ‘right’ answers to the questions raised by archaeological data, it is absolutely essential that we maintain an open and meaningful dialogue even in potential disagreement. This course is a space where multiple voices are respected and fostered.

**Texts**

All weekly readings will be made available. There are no required texts for this course.
Weekly Schedule

January 23 — Introduction to the study of inequality


January 30 — What does ‘stuff’ have to do with it?


February 6 — The origins of social hierarchy


*** Written Assignment I due 5pm on Friday, February 9th ***

February 13 — Socioeconomic class

Theory


Case studies


**February 20 — Gender**

*Theory*


*Case studies*


Nevett, Lisa C. 2011. “Towards a Female Topography of the Ancient Greek City: Case Studies from Late Archaic and Early Classical Athens (c. 520-400 BCE).” *Gender and History* 23 (3): 576–596.

**February 27 — Sexuality and queer theory**

*Theory*


*Case studies*


***Written Assignment II due 5pm on Friday, March 2**nd***

**March 6 — Race and ethnicity**

*Theory*


Case studies


**Meet with instructor to discuss topic for Written Assignment III**

March 20 Week 8 – Slavery

Theory


Case studies


**First draft of Written Assignment III due 5pm on Friday, March 23rd**

March 27 — Empire, colonization, and resistance

Theory


Case studies


April 3 Week 10 – Movement, migration, and displacement

Theory


Case studies


April 10 — Globalization

Theory


Case studies


***Peer feedback on Written Assignment III due 5pm on Friday, April 13th***

April 17 — Archaeological fieldwork and the challenges of diversity


April 24 — Who owns the material record?


May 1 — Understanding the stuff of inequality

Student presentations

***Final draft of Written Assignment III due 5pm on Friday, May 11th***