

## **INEQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE & REDISTRIBUTION:** FROM CLASSIC POLITICAL ECONOMY TO THE DIGITAL AGE

Professor: **Emanuele FERRAGINA**

Session: **July 2026**

Language of instruction: **English**

Number of hours of class: **36h**



### **Objective of the Course**

The course examines inequality, social justice, and redistribution through a political economy lens. It provides a conceptual framework to analyse how national policies and the international political economy context shape redistribution. Students will acquire classical political economy tools to understand the evolution of modern capitalism and contemporary societal developments: from changing productive systems and social policies to the emergence of 'co-evolution' between humans and artificial intelligence in the digital age.



### **Summary**

The course is divided into two parts. The first part provides an understanding of how: the notion of 'value' influences the functioning of capitalism; the mechanisms operating in the market economy are naturalized and universalized; and social class formation conditions contemporary capitalism. The second part applies these tools to understand the contemporary world. How does the welfare state redistribute? How has it changed over time? How do changes in productive systems affect inequalities? Is the welfare state a moderator or accelerator of gender and economic inequalities? What is the impact of international political economy transformations on social and political participation? Is the interaction between humans and artificial intelligence contributing to exacerbate traditional forms of inequalities?

Six student presentations and connected debates complete this program.

(1) A critical political economy of welfare regimes: employment and redistribution in contemporary social policy (class 6).

(2) Pivotal decade: how factories were traded for finance in the 1970s (class 7).

- (3) Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis (class 8).
- (4) Buying time: the delayed crisis of democratic capitalism (class 9).
- (5) A social history of artificial intelligence: are we facing a new division of work? (class 10).
- (6) The political economy of Artificial Intelligence: A critical reflection on human-AI coevolution (class 10).

The class material is complemented by additional readings, which provide students with resources to pursue specific interests and deepen their engagement with each session's themes.



## Organization of the course

### **PART I. INEQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REDISTRIBUTION: CLASSIC POLITICAL ECONOMY FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Session 1, Introduction & Theory of value and the functioning of capitalism (I)**

This introductory class details the course structure, which includes a mixture of lectures, student-led debates and collective discussions. The class also outlines the assessment, including group formation and the final exam. Each participant will present their background.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 1***

Jessop, 1998. 'Karl Marx' in Stones, R., (Eds.), *Key Sociological Thinkers*. Palgrave.

#### **Sessions 2, Theory of value and the functioning of capitalism (II)**

This session introduces the theory of value as the foundation for analysing capitalist economies. Through the lenses of Marx, it examines how value, commodities, and money emerge from social relations, focusing on the unique role of labor-power in generating surplus value. It explores the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation, technological change, and the resulting social contradictions, laying the groundwork for understanding contemporary issues of inequality, social justice, and redistribution.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 2***

The class deepens the concepts provided in the reading for the first class.

#### **Sessions 3, The great transformation of market economies**

This session examines Polanyi's critique of the self-regulating market as a disembedding force that commodifies labor, land, and money. This force naturalises markets as the principal regulatory mechanism in society. It then critically reflects upon the concept of the "double movement," where market expansion inevitably provokes societal protection and resistance.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 3***

Polanyi, K. 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Beacon Press (Introduction, Chapters 6 & 7).

#### **Sessions 4, The “making” of the working class and the origins of capitalism**

This session examines class as a dynamic process forged through collective experience and struggle rather than as a static economic category. It explores how workers in late 18th- and early 19th-century England developed a distinct political consciousness. This historical analysis thus serves as a critique of abstract economic models.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 4***

Thompson, E.P. 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Penguin (The Preface, Chapters 5 & 6)

### **PART II. INEQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REDISTRIBUTION IN PRACTICE: FROM THE ORIGINS OF THE WELFARE STATE TO THE DIGITAL AGE**

#### **Sessions 5, What is the welfare state for?**

This session examines the origins, purpose, and dual role – insurer against social risk and redistributive mechanism – of the modern welfare state. It explores key historical developments and foundational concepts such as social citizenship and universalism, while critically evaluating the major theories advanced to explain its emergence and development.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 5***

Skocpol, T. & Amenta, E. 1986. “States and Social Policies”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 12, 131-157.

#### **Sessions 6, The three worlds of welfare capitalism**

This session introduces and evaluates Esping-Andersen’s typology of welfare regimes. It examines the core concepts – de commodification and social stratification – used to classify regimes and explores subsequent debates. The class also discusses methodological tools for analyzing welfare state variation and stability over time, assessing the enduring utility and limitations of regime typologies in comparative political economy.

#### ***Compulsory reading session 6***

Esping-Andersen, G. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Polity (Part I)

#### **Debate 1. A critical political economy of welfare regimes: employment and redistribution in contemporary social policy**

The two articles revisit Esping-Andersen’s work, reflecting on his theoretical evolution, and apply his framework to analyse welfare state change as a Polanyian “double movement” — one where retrenchment in compensatory policies occurs alongside expansion in employment-oriented investment. This analysis raises critical questions: how does the progressive narrowing of social policy analysis limit our understanding of inequality and redistribution in a globalized economy? Furthermore, can the Scandinavian social investment model be transferred to other countries without considering their positions in the international political economy?

**Readings presented by group 1:**

Ferragina, E. (2025). The 'two lives' of Esping-Andersen and the revival of a research programme: Gender equality, employment and redistribution in contemporary social policy. *Social Policy & Administration*, 59(1), 1-19.

Ferragina, E. (2022). Welfare state change as a double movement: Four decades of retrenchment and expansion in compensatory and employment-oriented policies across 21 high-income countries. *Social Policy & Administration*, 56(5), 705-725.

**Sessions 7, The political economy of modern welfare states**

This session examines the political economy of welfare state transformation from a demand-side Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) to a supply-side Schumpeterian Workfare State (SWS). It connects this macro-level shift – driven by globalization, financialization, and austerity – to the micro-level emergence of 'new social risks' (e.g., precarious work, care deficits). The class analyses how this transition redefined the relationship between capital, labour, and social policy, and explores the political challenges of a permanent austerity era.

**Compulsory reading session 7**

Jessop, B. 1993. "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy", *Studies in Political Economy*, 40, 7-39.

**Debate 2. Pivotal decade: how factories were traded for finance in the 1970s**

Stein traces the US transitioned from a postwar "age of compression" – characterized by shared prosperity, strong unions, and a manufacturing-based economy – to a subsequent "Age of Inequality," dominated by finance and deregulation. What are the key economic, political and social features of each age? How does Stein's framework connect to Jessop's concepts of the KWS and SWS? How does an analysis of the 1970s as a pivotal decade help us understand contemporary issues like persistent trade deficits, rising income inequality, and debates over globalization and industrial policy? Why does Stein argue the 1970s were a pivotal turning point?

**Reading presented by group 2:**

Stein, J. (2010). *Pivotal decade: How the United States traded factories for finance in the seventies*. Yale University Press.

**Sessions 8, Class, Gender & Welfare State Change**

This session examines the political economy of family policy expansion within the context of welfare state retrenchment. It explores how family policies intersect with class and gender dynamics, asking whether such expansion supports commodification and liberalisation or promotes gender equality and social reproduction. The class assesses national variations across OECD countries and discusses the distributional consequences of prioritising childcare over redistributive income support.

**Compulsory reading session 8**

Ferragina, E. 2019. The Political Economy of Family Policy Expansion. *Review of International Political Economy*, 29 (6): 1238-1265.

### **Debate 3. Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis**

Nancy Fraser traces feminism's shift from a radical movement critiquing capitalism to one increasingly focused on identity and recognition, a shift that has often aligned with neoliberal agendas. Why has the feminist focus shifted from redistribution to recognition, and what are the consequences? In what ways has neoliberalism "co-opted" feminist goals? Can the "crisis of care" be resolved within capitalism, or does it require a more radical transformation? How does Fraser's model of a "triple movement" (social protection, emancipation, *and* marketization) reframe feminist strategy today?

#### **Reading presented by group 3:**

Fraser, N. (2020). *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Verso.

### **Sessions 9, Bringing the voice of the invisibles back in**

This session explores whether austerity, labor market deregulation, and welfare state retrenchment have given rise to a "rising invisible majority" – a growing segment of society marginalized by unemployment and precarious work. The class analyzes the material and social dimensions of this group and its withdrawal from traditional institutions. Drawing on Polanyi, it then asks: can a social countermovement based on this 'majority' emerge to challenge the foundations of the contemporary political economy order?

#### **Compulsory reading session 9**

Ferragina, E., Arrigoni, A., & Spreckelsen, T. F. (2022). The rising invisible majority: Bringing society back into international political economy. *Review of international political economy*, 29(1), 114-151.

### **Debate 4. Buying time: the delayed crisis of democratic capitalism**

Streeck argues that since the 1970s, governments managed the crisis of democratic capitalism repeatedly postponing systemic conflict – first through inflation, then public debt, and finally private debt. This protracted process of "buying time" has dismantled the post-war class compromise, eroded the fiscal capacity of the state, and transferred power from democratic politics to financial markets. How do the three sequential crises (inflation, public debt, private debt) illustrate the state's diminishing capacity to manage capitalism and maintain social peace? In what ways has "financialization" functionally replaced the welfare state as a tool for social pacification in advanced democracies?

#### **Reading presented by group 4:**

Streeck, W. 2014. *Buying Time. The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. Verso.

### **Sessions 10, Debates 5 & 6**

### **Debate 5. A social history of artificial intelligence (AI): are we facing a new division of work?**

AI is not a product of abstract science, but a social technology rooted in labor automation. From 19th-century industrial machinery to 20th-century cybernetics, "intelligent" machines have been shaped by the division of labor, class hierarchies, and the extraction of collective knowledge. How can we challenge the myth of AI as an

autonomous and neutral technology? In what specific ways does AI function as an instrument of social control, and whose labor is rendered invisible in its operation? Is the concept of “general intellect” relevant for understanding contemporary data-driven knowledge economy? How can this understanding of AI inform current struggles over data ownership, labor rights, and the future of automation?

**Reading presented by group 5:**

Pasquinelli, M. (2023). *The eye of the master: A social history of artificial intelligence*. Verso.

**Debate 6. The political economy of artificial intelligence. A critical reflection on human-AI coevolution**

The three texts explore the political economy and societal impact of digital platforms, and the concept of “techno-feudalism.” The notion of “accumulation of the means of recommendation” helps exploring how AI-driven platforms exacerbate inequality through “human-AI coevolution”. What is the “means of recommendation,” and how does its control differ from owning the means of production? What would a “society-centred AI” look like, and how could it be governed?

**Readings presented by group 6:**

Ferragina, E., & Pappalardo, L. On the Accumulation of ‘The Means of Recommendation’: A Political Economy of Human-AI Coevolution.

Morozov, E. (2022). Critique of techno-feudal reason. *New Left Review*, 133(134), 89-126.

Pedreschi, D., Pappalardo, L., Ferragina, E., Baeza-Yates, R., Barabási, A. L., Dignum, F., & Vespignani, A. (2025). Human-AI coevolution. *Artificial Intelligence*, 339, 104244.

**Sessions 11, Recap and QA**

This class summarises the main concepts discussed in the course and provides a general space to deal with students doubts and concerns.

**Sessions 12, Where are you from? Local neighbours in a global context. What can we learn from each other?**

This class connects our discussion about global inequalities to students’ individual experience. Each student will have to present with a few slides/photos in 3 to 5 minutes the neighbourhood where he grew up. Where this neighbour is (state, city)? What are the socio-economic characteristics of the neighbour? How is this neighbour integrated in the city and the country? Is there something that we can collectively learn from the experience you had growing up in your neighbour? The exercise will help us to get to know the social spaces where we grew up in and how they relate to the global themes discussed in the course.



## Requirements for validation

**1. Presentation of readings and debate (40% of grade).** During the first class students will be divided in six groups. Each group will be responsible to present a book or a series of readings and introduce the discussion (during lectures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10). The time allocated for the exercise is one hour and twenty minutes (including presentation and discussion). Each group will be assessed on: (1) the capacity to clearly illustrate the content of each assigned reading, (2) the capacity to introduce the debate, (3) the ability to stimulate a lively discussion with the rest of the class. The readings and debates are listed in the reading list.

**2. Summary and critique of weekly readings (40% of grade):** Each student will summarize and critique the readings for one selected week (students can pick any week). The paper is worth 50% of the grade. The page limit is 3 1.5-spaced pages (use 12-point Times New Roman font).

### *Summary*

Step back and think about the key ideas and central arguments of the readings. Describe what you have learned from the set of readings assigned for that week first (in a paragraph), and then highlight the unique contributions of each one or each subset of readings, respectively. Focus on the big picture instead of each and every detail. Limit the summary portion of the assignment to about 2 pages. Grades for this assignment will depend primarily on the organization and accuracy of the summary, accounting for about 2/3 of grade.

### *Critique*

Think critically about the ideas, methods, and evidence presented in the readings, the style of their writing, and whether it is interesting and enlightening. Is the thinking logical and reasonable? Why or why not? What are the strengths of the arguments? Are the methods used appropriate? Is the evidence robust and supportive of the arguments? Where do you see flaws, weaknesses, or aspects that are not convincing? What would be a better way to think about the issue or topic? What is lacking or overlooked? What might be some innovative and well-reasoned ideas about the issue or topic at hand? Evaluate the readings either as a whole or critique just one or one subset of the readings. Not every reading should be expected to cover everything, which is why multiple readings are assigned to address various facets of a topic. If you choose to critique the reading as a whole, compare and contrast the authors' ideas and arguments. How are they similar or different? How can they learn from each other?

Do not answer all of the questions listed above. These are designed to help you think about how to critique the readings thoughtfully and constructively. Focus on 1-3 of these questions. This part of the paper should not exceed 1 page and account for about 1/3 of grade.



The assignment should be submitted via Moodle by the specified due date. Late submissions will result in the deduction of 1 point for each day, including weekends. Every page beyond the page limit will result in a deduction of 1 point.

**3. Class attendance and participation (20% of grade):** Each student is expected to participate fully in class discussions.



### Professor's Biography



**Emanuele Ferragina** is Full Professor of Sociology at Sciences Po. He grew up in Catanzaro, in the deep south of Italy. Prior to Sciences Po, he was a Departmental Lecturer at the University of Oxford, where he also received his PhD. His main research interest is the political economy of the welfare state. Besides academia, he has established (with a group of Italian researchers) the think tank Fonderia Oxford, which has the objective of raising public awareness about important societal issues, such as the rigidity of the Italian

labor market, the lack of social cohesion in the Mezzogiorno, and the Italian brain drain. He also regularly writes for Il Fatto Quotidiano about equality, labor market issues, party politics, the welfare state, and lower league football.