The richest 85 people in the world today possess wealth equal to that of half of the world’s entire population. If that statistic startles us, it also provokes debate about inequality’s causes and morality, and it inspires fantasies of a global moral community and redemptive humanitarianism. Many have declared wealth inequality to be an urgent global risk—including Nobel-Prize winning economists, Pope Francis, IMF managing director Christine Lagarde, President Barack Obama, and hosts of the annual World Economic Forum at Davos. Global wealth inequality attracts more attention from media, world leaders, and scholars today than it has in decades.

Why do some consider rising wealth inequality to be an inevitable or evolutionary process, while others vigorously contest this notion? What causes wealth inequality? Is inequality harmful, and if so, in what ways? How have popular discourses as well as scholarly thinking about wealth inequality changed in recent years? How may rising inequality threaten a parallel trend—namely the decline between the early 1980s and the early 2000s in the number and percentage of the world’s people living in absolute poverty? Why do nearly three-quarter’s of the world’s people live in countries where the gap between rich and poor is greater now than it was three decades ago? How are wealth inequalities connected to long-standing differences rooted in gender, race, ethnicity, and other identities? How might the neediness of the benefactor shape humanitarianism? These questions and more are the focus of the honors seminar “Rethinking the Global Wealth Divide.” Readings incorporate geographically diverse examples and are drawn from anthropology, history, political science, psychology, economics, geography, sociology, literary and cultural commentary, and news media.

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