Oberlin College
Department of Politics

POLITICS 239: MARXIAN THEORY
Spring 2015
Professors Marc Blecher

Office: Rice 224
Phone: x8493
marc.blecher@oberlin.edu
Website: navigate here
Office hours: Wednesdays, 4:30-6:00 and
    Thursdays 3:00-4:30 (sign up here), and by
    appointment

Lecture: Tuesdays, 1:00-2:50, King 101
Discussion: Thursdays
    Section 1: 12:00-12:50, Severance 204
    Section 2: 1:00-1:50, Severance 204
    Section 3: 2:00-2:50, Severance 204

Will it take a war between the classes
to get you to digest what you consume?
Will it take a mandate from the masses
to get you to redecorate your room?

— Nothing Painted Red
(Karl’s Obie rock band)

Karl Marx, Oberlin Class of 1837,
at the age of 21
Politics 239 is a survey of Marxian theory from Marx and Engels to the present. We begin, of course, with in-depth study of the work of Marx and Engels. We proceed next to the work of some of the leading Marxian thinkers and political activists of the early twentieth century: Lenin, Gramsci, and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Finally, we take up examples of contemporary theoretical developments in Marxian feminism, crisis theory, and the question of alternatives to capitalism.

Marxian social theory emphasizes the linkages among history, economy, society, politics, culture and philosophy. Our approach, therefore, is necessarily inter-“disciplinary” (in scare quotes because Marxian theory antedates and questions the way we generally conceive of academic disciplines in the first place).

Reading will consist entirely of primary sources, i.e., the work of Hegel, Marx and leading Marxians themselves.

Each year Americans spend five times as much on dog food as on college books. Politics 239 is doing its part to help us get our priorities right. Please purchase the following books, which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore:

- Bernstein, Eduard, *The Preconditions of Socialism*
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*
- Harvey, David, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*
- Scott, Helen, ed., *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*
- Strunk, William, and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*
- Tucker, Robert C. ed., *The Lenin Anthology*
- __________, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*
- Wright, Erik Olin, *Envisioning Real Utopias*

All these books are on print reserve in Mudd as well, but not in sufficient quantities to permit you to count on finding them on demand. I urge Strunk and White even on good writers; we all need help writing. In your papers, I expect you to achieve a measure of the limpid elegance that they counsel (and which you can find each week gracing the pages of *The New Yorker*, which E. B. White edited).

We will also be reading substantial portions from the following books, so you would benefit from owning them. But they are also available on Blackboard.

- Bronner, Stephen and D. Kellner eds., *Critical Theory and Society*
- Vogel, Lise, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (out of print, but available from good used book dealers)

Marxian theory cannot be learned passively; it requires a strategy of active study, thinking and interchange. Three aspects of the course are designed to promote your engagement.

**§ BLOGS:** To encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help me calibrate lectures and lead discussions, I’m asking you to write two blogs each week. I take this aspect of the course very seriously; as you’ll see below, **they count for 40% of your grade**.

**§ By each Tuesday at 9:00 AM,** please write on Blackboard a short but substantive response to questions that I will have posed in advance on the previous week’s lecture outline. *(N.b. Read the questions carefully before you start the reading; they will help you read thoughtfully and efficiently, and avoid becoming a slave to the author.) You can also respond to what others in the class have written. Start a debate! Take a risk by staking out an original position. Please also use the blog to raise questions on which you would like help from me or fellow students.
§ By each Thursday at 9:00 AM, please post the questions you would like to address and/or the positions you would like to stake out in that day’s discussion.

§ The 9:00 AM deadlines are firm — indeed Blackboard closes the blog on the stroke of the hour — for two reasons. First, that’s when I start preparing for class, and the first thing I do is read your blogs. Second, the blogs are a process, not a product; the whole point is to do them week-in, week-out, not at the end of the term in order to meet a requirement.

§ So no, you cannot go back toward the end of the term and make up missed blogs. (But if you miss one due to a genuine emergency, please let me know.)

§ But even though the blogs count heavily in your grade, I do not grade them. Wtf? The purpose of the blogs to promote your learning and to encourage you to think and write freely and creatively, and to take risks. So I just factor into your final grade whether you have done them seriously and regularly (rather than my sense of how brilliant or carefully wrought they were).

§ DISCUSSIONS: Please prepare for and participate in weekly discussions which will take place on Thursdays. Since there are no new reading assignments for Thursdays, please prepare by reviewing the week’s reading and lecture notes and by reading your classmates’ blogs for that week, which will also help us shape our conversation.

§ PAPERS: You will write two take-home, open-book essays of around 1,500 words (≈ 6 pages). They will challenge you to grapple with and comment critically and creatively upon the materials covered and issues raised in the course. The paper schedule appears on the course outline below. To give you an idea of what to expect and to help you orient your reading and thinking, starting on page 6 you will find the essay questions used in the previous offering of the course. Many of the same issues will be treated, perhaps with some of the same or very similar questions.

All this is pretty arduous. As Marx said in the Preface to the French edition of *Das Kapital*, with condescension befitting a German living in London addressing the French: “There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.”

So long as we live in bourgeois society, the unfortunate practice of grading — a way of putting a kind of price tag on you for the benefit of the labor market — will be with us. I will factor the various aspects of your work in Politics 239 into your grade according to the following weightings:

- Weekly individual forum comments: 40%
- Papers: 30% each
- Quality (not quantity) of contribution to class: A “fudge factor”

Please take careful note of these proportions. As noted above, they reflect my conviction that the daily process of the course is as important to your learning as the papers you will write. In the past students who assumed that the papers were their only significant responsibilities were often unhappily surprised at the end of the semester. ☹

You will benefit from a look at the Marx-Engels Internet Archive ([http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/)). Its trove of photographs may tantalize, but the real beauty lies in its texts of many of Marx and Engels’s greatest works, and a search engine that is useful in looking up important terms and passages.
Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

Tuesday, February 3: Marx I
Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 3-6, 26-65 (Preface to *Critique of Political Economy*; *On the Jewish Question*; *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*), 66-105 (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*)

Thursday, February 5: Discussion

Tuesday, February 10, Marx II
Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 136-200 (selections from *Holy Family*, *Poverty of Philosophy*, *Theses on Feuerbach*, *German Ideology*), 469-509, 579-593 (*Communist Manifesto*; *Working-Class Manchester* (Engels); *Class Struggle in France*)

Thursday, February 12: Discussion

Tuesday, February 17: Marx III
Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 294-442 (Selections from *Das Kapital*)

Thursday, February 19: Discussion

Tuesday, February 24: Marx IV
Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 594-652 (*18th Brumaire*; *Civil War in France*), 522-548, 653-677 (*Critique of the Gotha Program* and other polemics; *Imperialism in India*; *Social Relations in Russia*)

**FIRST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

Thursday, February 26: Discussion

Tuesday, March 3: Engels

Thursday, March 5: Discussions

**SATURDAY, MARCH 7, NOON: PAPERS DUE**

Tuesday, March 10: Revisionism (Bernstein) and Orthodoxy (Luxemburg)

Thursday, March 12: Discussion

Tuesday, March 17: Lenin I
Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 12-114 (*What Is To Be Done*?), 311-398 (*The State and Revolution*)
Thursday, March 19: Discussion

**SPRING BREAK**

Tuesday, March 31: Lenin II

Thursday, April 2: Discussion

Tuesday, April 7: Gramsci I

Thursday, April 9: Discussion

Tuesday, April 14: Gramsci II

Thursday, April 16: Discussion

Tuesday, April 21: Critical Theory; Gender
Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, chs. 10-11 (on print reserve and Blackboard)

Thursday, April 23: Discussion

Tuesday, April 28: Contemporary Crisis Theory
Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*
Wolfgang Streeck, “How Will Capitalism End?” (on Blackboard)

**SECOND PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

Thursday, April 30: Discussion

Tuesday, May 5: Alternatives to Capitalism
Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10

Thursday, May 7: Discussion

Tuesday, May 12, 4:30 PM: **SECOND PAPER DUE**
ESSAY QUESTIONS FROM RECENT OFFERINGS OF THE COURSE

First Essay Topics

1. To what extent is the young Marx's theory of alienated labor compatible with the mature Marx's account of capitalist exploitation? What, if anything, is added by the latter? And is anything lost?

2. How essential is Marx's economic theory of capitalism to Marxian theory generally? For example, if Marx's theory of value or the laws of motion of capital were called into question, or if his predictions about capitalism's economic crises were problematic, would this discredit his theory, and if so, to what extent?

3. Sum up Marx's theory of the state in capitalist society and its relation to class domination and class struggle. Then analyze it. Some possible ways to do so could be: Are the instrumental and structural theories contradictory in any way, and if so in what senses? Insofar as they are different, do they just apply under different conditions? If so, do Marx and Engels specify those conditions? What are the consequences of each, for theory and for practice? You may well think of other lines of analysis and critique, of course.

4. Why does Marx conceptualize class in terms of relation to the means of production, rather than in terms of other elements such as (for example) income, wealth, or prestige? What are the consequences, and advantages and disadvantages, of his concept of class for his theory generally?

5. “Marx's critique of ideology, and indeed his whole base/superstructure distinction, are inherently self-destructive, for they can be applied to the critique of Marx’s theory itself.” — D. Gustibus.

How would Marx respond? Discuss critically the issues that matter.

6. Is it consistent for Marx to have held both that material conditions make transformation inevitable, and that a revolutionary working class is to bring about such a transformation through conscious purposive action? Discuss Marx on the relation between theory and practice, highlighting any tensions you see in his account. You may especially want to think about issues of class consciousness and motivation for collective action.

7. Critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Marx's conception of value and the way he employs it to theorize the laws of motion of capital in Das Kapital. Consider, for example, his conception of forces and relations of production, value, surplus value, exploitation, and how exploitation leads ineluctably to the destruction of the capitalist system. (You should stick to the theoretical level here rather than discuss Marx's ability to explain or predict the workings of actual capitalist economies. Also, while question #2 invites you to analyze the importance of Marx's economic theory for his theory generally, this question asks you to write an internal critique of his economic theory.)

8. Does Marx have a theory of politics? For example, does he have any insights about how workers who co-operate the machinery of capitalism will actually coöperate in making a revolution or running socialism? If so, what are his views? If not, why not, and with what consequences?
9. In what ways is Engels’s theory of dialectical materialism consistent with Marx’s theory of historical materialism? In what ways is it not? What is at stake here, at least for theory but, if you like, for practice as well?

10. In what ways is Engels’s theory of the historical development of gender relations consistent with Marx’s theory generally? In what ways is it not? What is at stake here, at least for theory but, if you like, for practice as well?

11. Compose your own question, discuss it with me (an essential step), and then respond to it in writing.

Second Essay Topics

(Nb. There will be additional, new questions this year, based on newly added topics and readings)

1. Discuss Lenin’s conception of theory and practice in relation to his revision of Marx’s theory, and offer your own views. If you find it helpful, bring Bernstein’s, Luxemburg’s or Gramsci’s views on this subject into play.

2. “Lenin applied Marxian theory to a material and historical setting very different from the one Marx had in mind. This produced a major distortion of Marxian theory, and serious problems for the practice of state socialism in Russia and beyond.” — Kurt Remarque

3. Compare Bernstein, Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci on the subject of the bourgeois state and representative democracy, keeping Marx in view. Which writer has the most adequate view of the subject?

4. What, if anything, does Lenin’s theory lack in light of his inability to have read the early Marx? What are the implications?

5. Is there a tension in Lenin between proletarian or socialist democracy and dictatorship of the proletariat? If so, does he resolve it? What would Marx and/or Gramsci say?

6. Gramsci goes beyond the more traditional materialist Marxian preoccupation with political economy by emphasizing the importance of culture and belief systems in understanding the obstacles to and possibilities for transformation of capitalism. Is this a strength or weakness of his approach? Discuss critically.

7. Compare Gramsci and Lenin on revolutionary organization and strategy, and discuss the implications. Issues include: the role of intellectuals, the appropriate and inappropriate historical and material contexts for revolution, the obstacles to be overcome, the question of democracy.

8. Gramsci’s revolutionary temper was tersely expressed in the maxim “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”. Does this have roots in Marxian theory? Think in terms of the dialectic between structure and action.

9. How do Lenin and Gramsci differ in their concepts of intellectual activity and of the intellectual? How do they envision the intellectual within a revolutionary party and movement? To what extent is education a factor in intellectualty, and what kind of education do they have in mind? In what ways is class a factor? What are the implications of these beliefs for Leninist and Gramscian theory and practice? Do their conceptions of political action differ fundamentally?

10. Discuss the relationship of class (“in itself”) and consciousness in Lenin and Gramsci with reference to Marx. Take a position on the issues.

11. Vogel tries to work out a coherent, materialist Marxian feminism. What Marxian elements, if any, does she omit, and with what theoretical cost? Can you think of a Marxian approach to gender that would in your view be more adequate than either Vogel
or Engels?
12. Is Marxian theory a “science”? What does being a “science” imply about the Intellectual and practical content of Marxian thought? Discuss critically with respect to Lenin and at least one other writer, referencing Marx and Engels on the topic.
13. Some theorists in the second part of the course emphasize elements of the superstructure or advocate blurring the distinction between base and superstructure, while others insist on the primacy of the material base. Is departure from a base/superstructure distinction a strength or limitation under late-modern capitalism? To what extent is it a departure from Marx? Write with reference to several contrasting texts.
14. The critical theorists (e.g., Marcuse) urge Marxians to take what appears to be non-class struggles more seriously. Yet they do so as “Marxians” who still believe that class remains crucial to analysis and struggle. Relate their analyses of class to that of Marx, developing your own position about the merits of their approaches.
15. Choose an issue of concern to you. State briefly your own analysis of it and, if you like, any views you may have about practice in relation to it. Then show how one or more of the theorists was have studied in the second half of the semester — e.g., Lenin, Gramsci, and/or Vogel — would support, amend, or challenge your position. Finally, reëvaluate your original position.
16. Compose your own question, discuss it with me (an essential step), and then respond to it in writing.