Oberlin College
Department of Politics

FIRST YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM 094: DAS KAPITAL
Fall 2010
Professor Marc Blecher

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Class meets Tuesday and Thursday, 1:30-2:45, King 235

Karl Marx's Das Kapital, a breathtaking classic not just of economic analysis but also of political economy, sociology, history and literature, is worth reading at any time for what it can teach us both substantively and also about the dialectical method. And since Das Kapital is, among much else, a theory of the crisis tendencies of capitalism, it is all the more pertinent at a time when existing neo-classical (and especially neo-liberal) economic theories and models have failed.

In FYSP 094 we will read all thirty three chapters of Volume I methodically, paying attention both to the substance of the argument and to its structure. In so doing we will learn what the dialectical method is and how, in its focus on the tensions and oppositions in structures, and the complex relationships among their parts, it differs from the standard rationalist approach that focuses on causes and effects. Of course we will also learn what Marx had to say about commodities, value, money, labor, value, "exploitation", and mystification (the process by which the capitalist system systematically obscures its inner forms and relationships).

The seminar will involve three different learning formats. We will read Das Kapital carefully, aided by David Harvey’s companion volume. We will also take advantage of an extraordinary resource: the online lectures by Prof. Harvey, who has been offering this course for four decades (http://davidharvey.org/reading-capital/). In class we will discuss the book and the lectures, dividing our time between getting a grasp on the arguments and exploring their usefulness (or uselessness) and implications for our time.
Das Kapital is what we would call inter-disciplinary; Marx would say it is non-disciplinary or downright anti-disciplinary in that it actually is a critique of the ways social science has come to segment knowledge. More specifically, it is a work that involves economics, history, philosophy, political science and sociology. It is also a stunning work of literature, chock full of brilliant prose, sophisticated literary references, and a range of literary styles that we will discuss to ascertain why he deploys them at specific junctures to make particular points.

It is obviously a highly political as well as rigorously analytical work. As such, it will provide fodder for discussion of the omnipresent question of the politics of intellectual work.

Before each class I expect you to complete readings for the day. In class the material cannot be covered in anything approaching the fullness of what you need to know about it; ipso facto, classes cannot substitute for the reading. If you have not done the reading before class, you will not be able to get much out of what your classmates and I have to say, or to contribute much if anything yourself. You will, moreover, feel lost.

We will be making intensive and regular use of Blackboard, so please learn it by the end of our first week. You can find it at: http://oncampus.oberlin.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp We will use Blackboard in several ways.

§ To encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help me calibrate what we do in class, once each week I expect you to write on Blackboard a short response to questions about the works we are confronting that we will have posed in advance. You are also invited to comment there at any time on what others in the class have written. Start a debate! You may also use the blog to raise questions on which you would like help from us or from fellow students.

§ I use the blogs to promote your learning, not to evaluate it. I want you to think and write your blogs freely and creatively, and to take risks. Therefore I do not grade them. But because I view them as very important for your learning, I do factor heavily into your final grade whether you have simply done them seriously and regularly.

§ Once each week you should respond in writing on the blog to questions that I will pose for each session. Specifically, those of you with surnames beginning A-M will do so by Tuesday morning at 9:00 AM, and those with surnames N-Z by 9:00 AM Thursday. The 9:00 deadline is firm because that’s when I start preparing for class. Moreover, the blog closes at 9:00 AM, both to enforce this deadline and also because I do not want students making up missed blogs later in the semester; the whole point of the blogs is to do them week-in, week-out, not subsequently in order to meet a requirement. If you must miss or inadvertently have missed your appointed day, just post a reply for the other day that week; if you miss a week, do two the following week. You may, of course, respond more than once each week if you like; the more often you do, the more you will learn.

§ On each morning or early afternoon before class, prepare for class by taking a few moments to log in to the blog to read what everyone has written.

You will also write three open-book, take-home essays of approximately 1,250-1,500 words (≈ 5-6 pages) each. The schedule can be found in the course outline below. The essays require a command of the material, but they are oriented mainly toward developing your engagement with and analysis and interpretation of it. Karim Hajj, our writing associate, will be available to help you with your papers, as of course will I.
I will factor the various aspects of your work into my evaluation according to the following weightings:

- Weekly blogs and quality (not quantity) of class participation 40%
- Papers 20% each

*Please take careful note of these proportions.* 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 for the course were unpleasantly surprised at the end of the semester. 😊

We are fighting the high cost of college books by using only two, both of which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore:

- David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*
- Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (Ben Fowkes, tr.) *NB.* Please purchase only this edition, as we will all need to have uniform pagination.

Finally, please download David Harvey’s lectures on *Capital* from http://davidharvey.org/reading-capital/

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## Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

**September 7:** Course Introduction

**September 9:** Class canceled (*Rosh Hashanah*)

**September 14, 16 and 21:** Introduction to *Das Kapital;* Commodities and Exchange

- Screen lectures 1 & 2
- Read: Karl Marx, *Das Kapital,* chapters 1 & 2
- Read: Harvey, chapters 1 & 2

**September 23 & 28:** Money

- Screen lecture 3
- Read: Marx, chapter 3
- Read: Harvey, chapter 2

**September 30 & October 5:** From Capital to Labor Power

- Screen lecture 4
- Read: Marx, chapters 4-6
- Read: Harvey, chapter 3

**SEPTEMBER 30: FIRST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

**October 7 & 12:** The Labor Process and the Production of Surplus Value

- Screen lecture 5
- Read: Marx, chapters 7-9
- Read: Harvey, chapter 4

**OCTOBER 9, NOON: FIRST PAPER DUE.**
October 14 & 19: The Working Day
   Screen lecture 6
   Read: Marx, chapters 10-11
   Read: Harvey, chapter 5

October 21 and November 2: Relative Surplus Value
   Screen lecture 7
   Read: Marx, chapters 12-14
   Read: Harvey, chapter 6

November 4 & 9: Technology
   Screen lecture 8
   Read: Marx, chapter 15, sections 1-3
   Read: Harvey, chapter 7
   **NOVEMBER 4: SECOND PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

November 11 & 16: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry
   Screen lecture 9
   Read: Marx, chapter 15, sections 4-10
   Read: Harvey, chapter 8
   **NOVEMBER 13, NOON: SECOND PAPER DUE**

November 18 & 23: From Surplus Value to Capital Accumulation
   Screen lecture 10
   Read: Marx, chapters 16-24
   Read: Harvey, chapter 9

November 30 & December 2: Capitalist Accumulation
   Screen lecture 11
   Read: Marx, chapter 25
   Read: Harvey, chapter 10

December 7 & 9: Primitive Accumulation
   Screen lecture 12
   Read: Marx, chapters 26-33
   Read: Harvey, chapter 11
   **DECEMBER 9: THIRD PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

December 14: Conclusion
   Screen lecture 13
   Read: Harvey, pages 315-343

**DECEMBER 17, 4:30: THIRD PAPER DUE**