First Year Seminar/Politics 12:  
SOCIALISM: REAL AND IMAGINED  

Chris Howell  
Fall 2013  

Class: King 325, Tuesday & Thursday 11:00am-12:15pm  
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Office hours: Monday 10:30-noon; Tuesday 2:15-3:15pm, or by appointment. Please sign up online for office hours at: http://tiny.cc/Ywoje  

Introduction  

In the context of the most significant crisis of free market capitalism since the 1930s, and a revival of public intervention in the economy, the term “socialism” has undergone a renewal of interest, as a term of abuse, as a curiosity, and as a characterization of much of what governments do. This course will explore the historical meanings and contemporary relevance of socialism. Its focus will be the experience and relevance of socialism to industrialized democracies; in other words, to societies like our own.  

The course is divided into three main sections. The first is an examination of political theory, surveying various strands of socialist thought including the utopian socialists, and Marxian socialism. Students will also read some examples of utopian socialist fiction. The second section of the course will examine a handful of concrete socialist experiments that are most relevant to the contemporary period in order to investigate what worked, what did not, and why. It is important to emphasize that the goal of the course is not to offer an extended evaluation and post-mortem of Soviet or state centrally-planned socialism; its goal is to look at socialist experiments and models that are relevant to citizens in the United States and other industrialized democracies today. So examples in this section will include the French socialist experiment under Mitterand, the wage-earner funds plan in Sweden, the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain, along with case studies of worker-owned firms in the United States.  

The third section of the course imagines what a viable and democratic socialism would look like today. I want you to be able not only to have concrete examples of socialist experiments, but to engage in the process of imagining or re-imagining socialism. How might we engage in utopian thinking in ways that are serious, grounded and self-critical? That seems to me to be one part of a liberal arts education – the part that follows from critical thinking, and moves beyond it. This section of the course samples a significant body of literature that has emerged in the last two decades (since the fall of communism) which investigates how we might construct a feasible socialism that is relevant to the contemporary period. It examines models that have been proposed for a feasible socialism, on a large or a small scale, ranging from the level of a single firm or town up to the national and international level.
Requirements

We will go over the course requirements in some detail in class, so what follows is only a brief summary of those requirements. Please ask me if any of this section is unclear and you are unsure of what is expected of you.

This is a seminar course, so full participation is the most important requirement. Students are expected to attend class, to do the reading in advance of class, and to come prepared to participate in class discussion. If you don’t do the reading, or you skip class, you obviously won’t get much out of the course.

There are three graded requirements. First, each student must write comments (anywhere from a paragraph or two to a page or two) on the readings each week. The purpose of the comments is to identify the main issues, questions and criticisms so that we can incorporate them into class discussion. A description of what I expect from these comments is available at the end of the syllabus and on the Blackboard web site for this class, and you should read it carefully. Students will also occasionally make oral presentations of the readings in class. The written comments, any presentations on the readings, and general class participation, will be worth 30% of the grade.

Second, there is an exam in the form of a reflective essay on a set topic. This essay will ask students to reflect critically upon the theoretical material presented in the first third of the course. The first draft of the exam will be due in class just before fall break. This class has a Writing Associate available to help you with your writing. Based on feedback from the Writing Associate, the final draft will be due early in November. I will hand out the essay question, or questions, two weeks before they are due. This requirement is worth 20% of the grade.

Third, you will write a short (12-15 pages) research paper, either individually or in small groups, on a topic of your choosing. We will talk much more about this in class, but the paper could examine some aspect of socialism that we have not dealt with at all, or it could go in more detail into something we briefly touched upon. The research paper could also be thought of as an “imagining” paper, in the sense that you examine some part of an imagined socialism, describe it and explain and justify the choices you make. It might be something as concrete as thinking about healthcare cooperatives or thinking through the structure and implications of municipal ownership of a sports team or movie theater. You must hand in a prospectus for your paper (giving me some idea of your topic) by October 30th. You will also be expected to give an oral presentation on your research topic in class on December 5th and 10th. The research paper itself is due by 11:00am on Thursday December 18th. Together, the prospectus, presentation and paper are worth 50% of the grade.

Finally, there will inevitably be some changes to the course as the semester progresses – changes in the readings, additional details of assignments, questions for the weekly comments, and so on – which are not included on this syllabus. I will provide updates in the “Announcements” section of the Blackboard web site for this course along with a syllabus and other materials. We will also use Blackboard for posting weekly comments, drafts of research papers and paper proposals. You should check the Blackboard site regularly.
Course readings

There are three books that we read all or almost all of for you to buy. They are available at the Oberlin Bookstore:

Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias (Verso, 2010).

All the other readings will be available electronically, and can be found at the “Course Readings” tab on Blackboard. You can then read (and if you wish, print) this material. The readings are listed alphabetically by the last name of the first author on the syllabus. Check page numbers carefully, so that you read the correct section of each reading at the correct time: in many cases I have had some sections of a book scanned in that you do not need to read, or that you read at different points in the semester.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

September 10  What is Socialism?

Erik Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, chapter 3 (pages 33-85).

Tony Wright, Socialisms: Old and New, chapter 2 (pages 18-34).

September 12, 17, 19 & 24  The Early Socialists

Robert Heilbroner, The Worldly Philosophers, chapters 5 and 6 (pages 96-153).

Nancy Folbre, Greed, Lust & Gender, chapters 11 & 12 (pages 158-189).

Robert Owen, A New View of Society, introduction and four essays (pages vii-xxxii & 10-92), and Summary of Mr. Owen’s Plan (pages 1-11). [Divide up and have student oral presentations.]


Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme, sections 1-4 (pages 7-21).

Karl Marx, The Civil War in France, chapter 5 and postscript by Engels (pages 33-43 & 53-57).

September 26

Library Visit I (Science Library Computer Lab)

No reading

October 1

Utopian Socialist Fiction I


October 3, 8 & 10

Social Democracy and the Welfare State

Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, chapter 1 (pages 7-46).

Gosta Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets*, chapter 1 (pages 3-38)


Mark Kesselman, “Prospects for Democratic Socialism in Advanced Capitalism: Class Struggle and Compromise in Sweden and France” (pages 397-438) in *Politics & Society* [1982].

Peter Aimer, “The Strategy of Gradualism and Swedish Wage-Earner Funds” (pages 43-55) in *West European Politics* [1985].


Bernard Brown, Socialism of a Different Kind, chapter 4 (pages 45-75).


October 15

Mondragon Cooperatives


BBC Documentary: *The Mondragon Experiment.*
October 29  
**Utopian Socialist Fiction II**

Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*, all.

October 31  
**Research Paper Topics**

Presentation of research paper topics. Post your research proposals on Blackboard by noon on Wednesday October 30. No assigned reading.

November 5  
**Library Visit II (Mudd 113 Computer Lab)**

No reading.

November 7  
**Experiments in the United States**


Christopher Gunn, “Plywood Cooperatives of the Pacific Northwest” (pages 393-416) in *Economic Analysis and Workers’ Management* [1980].

Gar Alperovitz, Ted Howard & Thad Williamson, “The Cleveland Model” *The Nation* [February 11, 2010].

November 12 & 14  
**Rethinking Socialism**

Erik Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, chapters 5-7 (pages 110-269).

November 19 & 21  
**Experiments within Capitalism**


Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers, Institutions that support gender equality in parenthood and employment” (chapter 1) in Gornick, Meyers et al. *Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labor* (pages 3-50).


**November 26 & December 3**

**Socialism: Market and Participatory**


**December 5 & 10**

**Student Research Paper Presentations**

No assigned reading other than student papers

**December 12**

**Return to Utopia**


David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Appendix (pages 257-281).

How To Do The Weekly Reading Comments Assignment

This assignment is not complicated, but it is easy to misunderstand. The purpose of these sets of comments is threefold. First, I want to know that you have read the assigned material ahead of class so that I can structure the class on the assumption that we have a shared starting point, and so that we can set about discussing the reading rather than having me simply lecture on it. The class is reading-driven because I am trying to expose you to a wide range of different viewpoints and approaches to the topic, and that requires that I do everything I can to encourage you to do the reading. Second, I need to know ahead of time if some part of the reading was consistently misunderstood so that I can concentrate on going over that material in class. It is often the case that one author or piece of reading is open to multiple interpretations, and if several students interpret it differently from me, we will need to discuss that. I may be expecting you to get something from the reading when you in fact take away something quite different. There may also be language and concepts that you don’t understand, so the written comments are an opportunity to let me know what you would like me to explain in class. Third, your reaction to the reading plays a central role in helping me decide how to organize class discussion. I am particularly interested in which readings resonated with you, and why, and which readings you found weak, irritating, ignorant, or whatever, and why. The critiques of the readings are the best place to start a class discussion – and it means I can call on you to explain your reaction.

What does this mean for the comments you write? It means that, at a minimum, I want the comments to demonstrate that you did the reading. That means a brief summary of the main themes and arguments presented in the reading. You can do this by writing a paragraph on each reading, or by drawing out some themes and using your comments to illustrate how each reading addressed those themes. You do not need to summarize and/or discuss every reading if you do not want to. I want a sense that you have done all the reading, but if you found some of the readings particularly insightful or heinous, then, by all means, focus on them in your comments. Do identify terms or concepts that you would like me to go over in class. Finally, along with your summary and questions, please offer comments, critiques and reactions to the readings. Again, you can do this for every reading, or just a few; you might organize your comments around a general critique of the readings for that week, or point to surprising similarities or differences.

The “product” should be written comments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. They should be posted to Blackboard at the ‘Discussion Board’ tab by the deadline listed on the syllabus. Please write and post your comments before reading those of other students in the class. I want your reactions to the reading, not your reactions to the comments of other students. You are welcome to respond to student comments after posting your own.

Here is how I grade the comments. I DO NOT make comments on them. If you post comments that demonstrate that you have done the reading, or the great bulk of it, regardless of the quality of those comments, you get one point. If you post no comments, or your comments appear to be about reading for another class, you do not get a point. On rare occasions your comments may be so impressive that I give you two points. In the past this has been true for only about 10% of students each week, and it only happens for comments that go well beyond summary and questioning to offer insightful reaction and critique. You can check that I read and graded your comments by going to the Blackboard gradebook each week. I’m also happy to meet with you to give you some further feedback on your written comments.