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

Chris Howell  
Fall 2011  

Class: King 121, Tuesday & Thursday 1:30pm – 2:45pm  
Office: Rice 226  
Office telephone: 775-8649; E-mail: chris.howell@oberlin.edu  
Office hours: Monday 10:30-noon; Tuesday & Thursday 3:00-4:00pm, 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 Marxist 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 Mitterrand, 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 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. 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 it might involve designing the constitution for a worker-owned firm, 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 November 3rd. You will also be expected to give an oral presentation on your research topic in class on December 6th and 8th. The research paper itself is due by 11:00am on Sunday December 19th. Together, the prospectus, presentation and paper are worth 50% of the grade. This class has a student writing associate available to help you with your writing.

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. Check the Blackboard site at least twice a
week. In the unlikely event that you miss a class, you should always check the web site in case I have announced something of importance.

**Course readings**

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


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 6**

*Introduction*

No reading

**September 8**

*What is Socialism?*


**September 13, 15, 20 & 22**

*The Early Socialists*


Robert Owen, *A New View of Society*, introduction and four essays (pages vii-xxxii & 10-92). [Divide up and have student oral presentations.]


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


**September 27**  
Library Visit I

No reading

**September 29**  
Utopian Socialist Fiction I


**October 4, 6 & 11**  
Reformism and Social Democracy

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 13 & 18  Mondragon Cooperatives


William Whyte and Kathleen Whyte, Making Mondragon, chapters 1-8 and 20-21 (pages 3-87 & 270-300).

BBC Documentary: The Mondragon Experiment.

October 20  Research Paper Topics

No reading

November 1  Utopian Socialist Fiction II

Ursula LeGuin, The Dispossessed, all.

November 3  Experiments in the United States


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


November 8 & 10  Rethinking Socialism

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

November 15  Library Visit II

No reading

November 17  Economic Democracy


**November 22**  
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 29 & December 1**  
Socialism: Market and Participatory


**December 6 & 8**  
Student Research Paper Presentations

**December 13**  
Return to Utopia


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