

Oberlin College  
Department of Politics

## **FIRST YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM 094: DAS KAPITAL**

Fall 2011

Professor Marc Blecher

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Class meets Tuesday and  
Thursday, 11:00-12:15, Wilder 211



Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, a breathtaking classic not just of economic analysis but also of political economy, sociology, history and even 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 many 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 economic and social 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: you can view 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 grasping 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 stands as 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 Marx 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 we cannot cover the material 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.

Each of us will choose our approaches for imbibing *Das Kapital*. I do want everyone to read the original at some point in the process; *i.e.*, Harvey's book and lectures are no substitute for Marx's own rich work. But whether you do that before or after working through Harvey in print or on video is up to you. My own approach, for example, is to read a few pages in *Das Kapital* first; then I turn to Harvey's lectures and volume up to the point where I stopped reading; and finally I go back and review the pages I just read. But you may find a way that works better for you. Indeed, if you feel you're getting Marx himself just fine without Harvey's help, more power to you.

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 guide and 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 I 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 me or from fellow students.
- § I use the blogs to promote your learning - they help you process and retain the material - 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 my evaluation of your work whether you have simply done them seriously and regularly.
- § 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 twice each week if you like; the more often you do, the more you will learn.

§ Just before each class, prepare 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 ( $\approx$  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. To give you an idea of what to expect and to help you orient your reading and thinking, starting on page 5 below you will find the essay questions used in the most recent offering of the course. You can expect many of the same issues to be treated this time around, probably with some of the same or similar questions. Andy Willens, 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 contribution to class discussion	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.) N.b. 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 6: Course Introduction

September 8-15: Introduction to *Das Kapital*; Commodities and Exchange

Terry Eagleton, "In Praise of Marx" (on Blackboard under "Course Readings")

Screen lectures 1 & 2

Read: Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, chapters 1 & 2

Read: Harvey, chapters 1 & 2

N.b. While in general I want you to begin each day with Marx, the introductory material for today requires a slightly different approach. Begin by watching the first half of Harvey's first lecture and reading the Introduction in his book. Don't

be put off by references he makes to various theorists of whom you may not have heard; either just breeze past that or, better, take a quick glance at Wikipedia pages especially for the major ones such as Hegel and Ricardo; but don't spend much time on that. When you have finished that, then start digging into *Das Kapital* - I suggest starting with the first four pages or so - before proceeding to the second half of the lecture and chapter I of Harvey.

September 20-22: Money

Screen lecture 3

Read: Marx, chapter 3

Read: Harvey, chapter 2

September 27-October 4: From Capital to Labor Power

**N.B. CLASS CANCELED ON SEPTEMBER 29 FOR ROSH HASHANAH** (out of respect for Marx, who descended from a long line of rabbis)

Screen lecture 4

Read: Marx, chapters 4-6

Read: Harvey, chapter 3

**SEPTEMBER 27: FIRST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

October 6-11: The Labor Process and the Production of Surplus Value

Screen lecture 5

Read: Marx, chapters 7-9

Read: Harvey, chapter 4

**OCTOBER 9: FIRST PAPER DUE.**

October 13-18: The Working Day

Screen lecture 6

Read: Marx, chapters 10-11

Read: Harvey, chapter 5

October 20-November 1: Relative Surplus Value

Screen lecture 7

Read: Marx, chapters 12-14

Read: Harvey, chapter 6

November 3-8: Technology

Screen lecture 8

Read: Marx, chapter 15, sections 1-3

Read: Harvey, chapter 7

**NOVEMBER 4: SECOND PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

November 10-15: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry

Screen lecture 9

Read: Marx, chapter 15, sections 4-10

Read: Harvey, chapter 8

**NOVEMBER 12: SECOND PAPER DUE**

November 17 & 22: From Surplus Value to Capital Accumulation

Screen lecture 10

Read: Marx, chapters 16-24

Read: Harvey, chapter 9

November 29-December 1: Capitalist Accumulation

Screen lecture 11

Read: Marx, chapter 25

Read: Harvey, chapter 10

December 6-8: Primitive Accumulation

Screen lecture 12

Read: Marx, chapters 26-33

Read: Harvey, chapter 11

**DECEMBER 9: THIRD PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED**

December 13: Conclusion

Screen lecture 13

Read: Harvey, pages 315-343

**DECEMBER 18, 9:00 AM: THIRD PAPER DUE**

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**ESSAY QUESTIONS FROM  
THE MOST RECENT OFFERING OF THE COURSE**

**FIRST ESSAY TOPICS**

1. What, if anything, does Marx gain from the labor theory of value (*i.e.*, the proposition that value = average socially necessary labor time)? What, if anything, does he lose?
2. Choose one or two examples (or more if you like) of dialectical argumentation in *Capital* thus far. What, if anything, does this approach reveal? What, if anything, does it miss or confound? How is it different from other forms of explanation to which you are accustomed?
3. Give some examples of how Marx's argument is *materialist* - *i.e.*, how it starts with the material world to explain our ideas rather than the other way around. How persuasive do you find it? (Hint: fetishism may help here, though I stress "may".)
4. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.

## SECOND ESSAY TOPICS

1. What is Marx's theory of the conflict over the working day? What does it have to do with wage labor? What are its effects on production of surplus value? On political conflicts between labor and capital? What are its implications for capitalism? Finally, and importantly, does this theory provide for you a new way to look at work and capitalism? If so, why and how? If not, why not?
2. Compare the various ways in which capitalists induce workers to produce surplus value. Is there an immanent theory here of how capitalism has developed over time? Whatever your answer, are there other uses of the theory for Marx? For you? If not, why not?
3. What is Harvey making out of footnote four? Analyze one or more ways Marx uses his points there as developed by Harvey (e.g., most prominently, in the analysis of the industrial revolution involving the rise of machines). Does he persuade you? If so, why? If not, why not? And in the end, is the sheer comprehensiveness and complexity of this dialectical model and its renunciation of causality tantamount to validating critics' claims that it is "bullshit"?
4. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.

## THIRD ESSAY TOPICS

1. What is the significance of the argument that capitalists purchase labor power but get labor, both for Marx's theory and for aspects of actual capitalism we see around us?
2. Marx argues that workers produce not just commodities and surplus value but capitalism itself. Discuss the ways in which he thinks they do so, differentiating material and ideal (i.e., ideational) processes and relating them to each other. In doing all this, pay attention to the argument that capitalism systematically hides itself. Finally, evaluate the argument, both as political economy and from a moral point of view (e.g., is he blaming the victim?).
3. What is Marx's theory of population dynamics? What, if anything, will it explain about the world we see around us? In what ways is that explanation limited?
4. Does Harvey's critical extension of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation undermine the rest of *Das Kapital*, which is concerned mainly with expanded reproduction? What's the relationship between the two processes?
5. What, if anything, can any of Marx's analyses in chapters 25-33, contribute to our understanding of a relevant problem of our day? (Choose a topic about which you already know a fair amount, since I want you in this paper to focus on analysis, not research. Some examples might be the neoliberal political economy from 1970 to the present, the current economic crisis, globalization, the environmental crisis, the role of the state in relationship to any of that. Harvey's last chapter ["Reflections and Prognoses"] can also provide some touchstones.) To what extent is its explanatory power limited?
6. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.