

MARX ON THE HUMAN CONDITION
POLITICAL SCIENCE 3055: SPRING 2019
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, STANISLAUS

Instructor: Alena Wolfink
Class: MW 12:00-12:50, Bizzini 131-A
Office Hours: By appointment, Bizzini 132-A
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This course is an introduction to Marxian political thought. We will read four pivotal texts by Karl Marx on the problems of ideology, recognition, alienation, and exploitation. We will become familiar with the relationships between key categories and concepts in Marxian political analysis, including, but not limited to, class, labor, work, production, consumption, surplus, and capital. However, because our emphasis will be on political thought, a recurring theme in our discussions of Marxian texts, questions, and arguments will also be an effort to understand what role significant, abiding political differences play in economic analysis. As such, this course also offers a thorough introduction to the now blossoming sub-subfield of comparative political theory. To this end, we will read Marx's texts alongside a number of efforts to extend, challenge, and think beyond his thought and its implications from within the folds of feminist, indigenous, Latinx, black, and queer political theory. In so doing, we will think about such questions as how settler colonialism and present-day incarceration represent transformations of primitive accumulation and dispossession, and how Marxian economic thought accounts for the unprecedented creation of racialized enslavement and ongoing efforts to uproot it. We will conclude by asking whether and how Marxian political thought offers resources for rethinking justice, freedom, sovereignty, and democracy today.

Learning Objectives

My objectives for student learning in this course include both knowledge and skills. By the end of the quarter, you will:

- Be familiar with the arguments and ideas presented in the readings, in lectures, and in classroom discussions.
- Understand some main theoretical debates around Marxism, capitalism, ideology, and identity and be familiar with examples from the political world to which the debates speak.
- Thoughtfully read complex texts and analyze arguments.
- Communicate your own ideas and arguments, verbally and in writing.

Requirements

I expect you to attend all class meetings, and to thoughtfully read all course materials. Your course grade will include the following components:

1. Attendance – 20%
2. Four short papers – 40% (10% each)

3. Leading class discussion – 20% (10% each time)
4. Take-home final – 20%

Extensions and incompletes are only for emergency cases. Contact me immediately – and in advance of any due dates – should urgent, unavoidable, and unforeseen circumstances interfere with your completion of the requirements.

Expectations

Readings:

The readings are the foundation of the course. Much of the reading is dense and difficult, and full of unfamiliar ideas. You must give sufficient time to actively **read and re-read** the materials slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully. ***You should plan to spend a number of hours a week reading and re-reading the course materials and preparing for class discussion.*** If you have taken these steps and are still having difficulty engaging in the course materials, arrange to see me in office hours.

Class Discussions:

Discussions provide an opportunity for more in-depth discussion and analysis of the material. Attendance and participation is required, and you are expected to be an active and consistent contributor. More specifically:

- You must come to class prepared to analyze and reflect on the readings—this means you must complete the assigned readings prior to class. Come to class on time, and bring a copy of the readings with you. If you are consistently late or frequently arrive without a copy of the assigned readings (or your notes), this will impact your participation grade.
- You will be expected to raise questions related to the material, share perspectives on and interpretations of the readings and discussion topics, and engage in respectful and thoughtful debate.
- Additionally, you will have the opportunity to collaborate with 2-3 other students to lead class discussions twice this semester. You will be expected to generate and share focused reading questions for our discussions, to facilitate said discussions using the questions that you have prepared, and to guide the class in any relevant small or large-group activities on those days. You will not be expected to give presentations on the readings; however, you should be particularly well-versed in the assigned material when you lead discussions.

Writing:

Clear writing is an extremely difficult task that can only be mastered through practice. Virtually no one is a born writer. Virtually everyone can be a good – even outstanding – writer. Focused papers will help to develop your skills, but they will require significant time thinking, writing, and revising and reworking. I will also be available to meet with you to discuss your papers, however, these meetings must be conducted in person. I also encourage you to seek help from the Writing Center or friends to review papers for you. At the very least, proofread your own work.

I take the responsibility of grading your work seriously, and will always strive to be fair and accurate in my evaluations. I will use the following standards for the evaluating written work in this course:

- A: Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant flaws. An ‘A’ paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation.
- B: Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, organized and interpreted logically. The ‘B’ paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an ‘A’; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.
- C: Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The ‘C’ paper meets the basic requirements of a thesis supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but it needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient and appropriate, or the interpretation may have logical flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The ‘C’ paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate but not noteworthy overall.
- D: Barely passing work that shows effort but is so marred by serious problems that it cannot be considered a satisfactory paper.
- F: Failing work—for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Some Classroom Practices and Policies

- Your curiosity and participation are essential to your learning success in this course. Please feel free to raise your hand during lectures if you have a question—every question brings something of value to the class.
- Bring your readings to every class.
- I have a strict **no internet** policy in my classrooms (computers, tablets, etc). The evidence is conclusive that use of the internet in the classroom inhibits student focus and learning, both for the student using the device and for others nearby.
- If you require accommodations because of a disability, please submit necessary paperwork from the Disability Resource Services office to me ASAP.
- Be on time. Do not leave midway through class except in emergency cases.

Note: Any form of academic dishonesty or plagiarism will be met with a failing grade and referral to the university for further discipline.

PSCI 3055: Marx on the Human Condition
Schedule of Classes and Readings
Spring 2019

January 28 & 30: Introductions

Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory* (Introduction)

PART ONE: Capital and Exploitation

February 4, 6: Capital Accumulation

Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (pages 41-54; 79-128)

February 11, 13: Capital Accumulation (continued)

Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (pages 163-173; 185-222, 784-805)

February 18 & 20: Slavery and Dispossession

Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* chapters 1-3

February 25 & 27: Slavery and Dispossession (continued)

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* (chapter 4)

PART TWO: Ideology

March 4 & 6: Materialism and Culture

Marx, *The German Ideology* (excerpts)

March 11 & 13: Ideology and Feminist Theory

Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (selections)

PART THREE: Recognition

March 25 & 27: Liberalism and the State

Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (excerpts)

April 3 & 8: Identity and Homogenization

Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (chapter 3)

April 10 & 15: Sovereignty and Settler Colonialism: From Seeking Civic Inclusion to Demanding Decolonization

Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (p. 1-20; chapter 2)

Robert Nichols, "Theft is Property!"

April 17

No class, I'm away at a conference

PART FOUR: Alienation

April 29 & May 1: Work, Species Being, and Freedom

Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (excerpts)

May 6 & 8: Alienation and Identity

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work* (introduction)

May 13 & 15:

Conclusions

Take-home final due via Blackboard on Monday, May 20th at 1pm