

Oberlin College
Department of Politics

POLITICS 239: MARXIST THEORY

Fall 2006

Professor Marc Blecher

Office: Rice 224 Phone: x8493 marc.blecher@oberlin.edu www.oberlin.edu/faculty/mblecher/m-blech.html Office hours: Tuesday 3:00-4:00 & Friday 2:30-4:00 (see signup sheet outside my office door)	Lectures Monday & Friday, 1:30-2:20, King 106; Discussions: Wednesday 1:30-2:20, 2:30-3:20 and 3:30-4:20, King 339
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Karl Marx, OC '1837, at the age of 21

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Will it take a war between the classes
To get you to digest what you consume?
Will it take a mandate from the masses
To get you to redecorate your room?

— *Nothing Painted Blue*
(Karl's Obie rock band)

Politics 239 is a survey of Marxist theory from Marx and Engels to the present. We begin before them, with Hegel, whose theories of dialectics and history were important philosophical influences on Marx. The heart of the course is our in-depth study of the work of Marx and Engels. We proceed next to the work of some of many of the leading Marxist thinkers and political activists of the early twentieth century: Lenin, Bernstein, Luxemburg, Kautsky, and Gramsci. Finally, we take up examples of contemporary developments such as feminist, environmental, analytical, and postmodern Marxism.

As a social theory, Marxism emphasizes the linkages among history, economy, society, politics, culture, and philosophy. Our approach, therefore, is necessarily inter-“disciplinary” (in quotes because Marxism antedates and questions the way we generally conceive of academic disciplines in the first place).

Reading will consist almost completely of primary sources, *i.e.*, the work of Hegel, Marx and leading Marxists themselves.

Each year Americans spend five times as much on dog food as on college books. Politics 239 is doing its part to help us get priorities right. Please purchase the following books at the Oberlin Bookstore:

Friedrich, C. J., ed., *The Philosophy of Hegel*.

Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

Luxemburg, Rosa, *Reform or Revolution?*

Strunk, William, and E.B. White, *Elements of Style*
(recommended)

Tucker, Robert C. ed., *The Lenin Anthology*.

_____, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

These books are on reserve in Mudd as well, but not in sufficient quantities to permit you to count on finding them on demand. I recommend Strunk and White even to good writers; we all need help writing. I will hold you responsible for the standard of elegant clarity that they counsel.

Marxist theory cannot be learned passively; it requires a strategy of active study, thinking, and interchange. Three aspects of the course are designed to promote your engagement.

§ First, to encourage reflective reading, once each week I expect you to write out on Blackboard a short response to a question about the works we are confronting. Specifically, those of you with surnames beginning with the letters A-M will do so by Sunday evening (for Monday’s class), and those of you with surnames beginning with the letters N-Z will do so by Thursday evening (for Friday’s class). You may, of course, respond twice each week if you like; the more often you do so, the more you will be likely to learn. You are also invited to comment there at any time on what others in the class have written. You may also use the forum to raise questions on which you would like help from me or from fellow students.

§ Second, I expect you to prepare for and participate in discussions we will hold in class each Wednesday. In addition to reviewing the week's reading and lecture notes, please read your classmates' Blackboard postings for the week, which amount to the start of our conversation.

§ Third, you will write two take-home, open-book essays of around 1,500 words (\approx 6 pages). They will challenge you to struggle with and comment critically and creatively upon the materials covered and issues raised in the course. The paper schedule appears on the course outline below. To give you an idea of what to expect and to help you orient your reading and thinking, below you will find the essay questions used in previous offerings of the course. Many of the same issues will be treated, perhaps with some of the same or very similar questions.

All this is arduous. As Marx said in the Preface to the French edition of *Das Kapital*: "There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits."

So long as we live in bourgeois society, the unfortunate practice of grading — a way of putting a kind of price tag on you — will be with us. I will factor the various aspects of your work in Politics 239 into your grade according to the following weightings:

Weekly individual forum comments	35%
Quality (not quantity) of participation in class	15%
Papers	25% 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 main responsibilities for the course were often unhappily surprised at the end of the semester.

You will benefit from a look at the Marx-Engels Internet Archive (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/>). Its trove of photographs may tantalize, but the real beauty lies in its texts of many of Marx and Engels' greatest works, and a search engine that is useful in looking up important concepts and quotations.

Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

September 6: Introduction: The Power and Problems of Marxist Theory

September 8: Hegel, I

Carl Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Hegel*, 3-42 (also available on eRes).

September 11: Hegel, II

Friedrich, ed., 260-296, 399-414 (also available on eRes).

September 13, 12:30 PM: Marx, I + Discussion

Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 3-6, 26-65.

September 15: Marx, II

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 66-105.

September 18, 20, 22: CLASS CANCELED (SO I CAN ATTEND A CONFERENCE IN CHINA)

September 25, 12:30 PM: Marx, III & IV

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 136-200, 469-509, 579-593.

September 27: Discussion

September 29: Marx, V

Begin reading Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 294-442 (to be finished by October 4).

FIRST ESSAY TOPICS DISTRIBUTED.

October 2: CLASS CANCELED (YOM KIPPUR)

October 4, 12:30 PM: Marx VI + Discussion

Finish reading Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 294-442.

October 6: Marx, VII

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 594-652.

October 9: Marx, VIII

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 525-541, 653-677.

October 11: Discussion

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, NOON: FIRST PAPER DUE.

October 13: CLASS CANCELED (SINCE FEW OF YOU WOULD COME ANYWAY)

October 16-20: FALL BREAK

October 23, 12:30 PM: Engels

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 681-768.

October 25: Discussion

October 27: CLASS CANCELED (SO I CAN ATTEND A CONFERENCE IN OXFORD, UK)

October 30: Revisionism and Orthodoxy (I): Bernstein and Kautsky

Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (on reserve and Eres).

November 1: Discussion

November 3: Revisionism and Orthodoxy (II): Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*

November 6: Lenin, I

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 12-114.

November 8: Discussion

November 10: Lenin, II

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 311-398.

November 13: Lenin, III

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 550-618.

November 15: Discussion

November 17: Lenin, IV

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 204-275.

November 20: Gramsci, I

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 123-157, 175-185, 229-247.

November 22: Discussion AT 1:30 ONLY

NOVEMBER 24: CLASS CANCELED (THANKSGIVING)

November 27: Gramsci, II

Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 257-264, 3-43.

Carnoy, ch. 3 (on reserve and Eres).

November 29: Discussion

December 1: Marxism and Gender,

Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (on reserve and Eres), chs. 10-11.

December 4: Marxism and the Environment

James O'Connor, *Natural Causes*, chapters 7-10 (on reserve and Eres).

SECOND ESSAY TOPICS DISTRIBUTED.

December 6: Discussion

December 8: Analytical Marxism

Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (on reserve and Eres), chapters 2, 7, 8.

December 11: Postmodern Marxism

Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution* (on reserve and Eres).

December 13, 1:00 PM: Conclusion + Discussion

DECEMBER 18, 9:00 AM: SECOND ESSAY DUE

ESSAY QUESTIONS FROM THE MOST RECENT OFFERING OF THE COURSE

First Essay Topics

1. Is the young Marx's theory of alienated labor compatible with the mature Marx's account of capitalist exploitation? What, if anything, is added by the latter? And is anything lost?
2. How essential is Marx's economic theory of capitalism to Marxist theory generally? For example, if Marx's theory of value or the laws of motion of capital were called into question, or if his predictions about capitalism's economic crises were problematic, would this discredit his theory, and if so, to what extent?
3. Sum up Marx's theory of the state in capitalist society and its relation to class domination and class struggle. Then analyze it. Some possible ways to do so could be: Are the instrumental and structural theories contradictory in any way, and if so in what senses? Insofar as they are different, do they just apply under different conditions? If so, do Marx and Engels specify those conditions? What are the consequences of each, for theory and for practice? You may well think of other lines of analysis and critique, of course.
4. Why does Marx conceptualize class in terms of relation to the means of production, rather than in terms of other elements such as (for example) income, wealth, or prestige? What are the consequences, and advantages and disadvantages, of his concept of class for his theory generally?
5. "Marx's critique of ideology, and indeed his whole base/superstructure distinction, are inherently self-destructive, for they can be applied to the critique of Marx's theory itself." – A. Nonimus.
How would Marx respond? Discuss critically the issues that matter.
6. Is it consistent for Marx to have held both that material conditions make transformation inevitable, and that a revolutionary working class is to bring about such a transformation through conscious purposive action? Discuss Marx on the relation between theory and practice, highlighting any tensions you see in his account. You may especially want to think about issues of class consciousness and motivation for collective action.
7. Critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Marx's conception of value and the way he employs it to theorize the laws of motion of capital in *Das Kapital*. Consider, for example, his conception of forces and relations of production, value, surplus value, exploitation, and how exploitation leads ineluctably to the destruction of the capitalist system. (You should stick to the theoretical level here rather than discuss Marx's ability to explain or predict the workings of actual capitalist economies. Also, while question #2 invites you to analyze the importance of Marx's economic theory for his theory generally, this question asks you to write an internal critique of his economic theory.)

8. Does Marx have a theory of politics? For example, does he have any insights about how workers who co-operate the machinery of capitalism will actually coöperate in making a revolution or running socialism? If so, what are his views? If not, why not, and with what consequences?
9. In what ways is Engels' theory of dialectical materialism consistent with Marx's theory of historical materialism? In what ways is it not? What is at stake here, at least for theory but, if you like, for practice as well?
10. In what ways is Engels' theory of the historical development of gender relations consistent with Marx's theory generally? In what ways is it not? What is at stake here, at least for theory but, if you like, for practice as well?
11. Compose your own question, discuss it with me (an essential step), and then respond to it in writing.

Second Essay Topics

1. Discuss Lenin's conception of theory and practice in relation to his revision of Marx's theory, and offer your own views. If you find it helpful, bring Bernstein's, Luxemburg's or Gramsci's views on this subject into play.
2. "Lenin applied Marxist theory to a material and historical setting very different from the one Marx had in mind. This produced a major distortion of Marxist theory, and serious problems for the practice of state socialism in Russia and beyond." – Kurt Rumarque
Comment, explicating Gramsci's and, if you like, Dirlik's position, and then taking your own.
3. Compare Bernstein, Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci on the subject of the bourgeois state and representative democracy, keeping Marx in view. Which writer has the most adequate view of the subject?
4. What, if anything, does Lenin's theory lack in light of his inability to have read the early Marx? What are the implications?
5. Is there a tension in Lenin between proletarian or socialist democracy and dictatorship of the proletariat? If so, does he resolve it? What would Marx and/or Gramsci say?
6. Gramsci goes beyond the more traditional materialist Marxist preoccupation with political economy by emphasizing the importance of culture and belief systems in understanding the obstacles to and possibilities for transformation of capitalism. Is this a strength or weakness of his approach? Discuss critically.
7. Compare Gramsci and Lenin on revolutionary organization and strategy, and discuss the implications. Issues include: the role of intellectuals, the appropriate and inappropriate historical and material contexts for revolution, the obstacles to be overcome, the question of democracy.
8. Gramsci's revolutionary temper was tersely expressed in the maxim "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will". Does this have roots in Marxism? Think in terms of the dialectic between structure and action.

9. How do Lenin and Gramsci differ in their concepts of intellectual activity and of the intellectual? How do they envision the intellectual within a revolutionary party and movement? To what extent is education a factor in intellectuality, and what kind of education do they have in mind? In what ways is class a factor? What are the implications of these beliefs for Leninist and Gramscian theory and practice?
10. Discuss the relationship of class ("in itself") and consciousness in Lenin, Gramsci and either Elster or Dirlik (or both), with reference to Marx. Take a position on the issues.
11. Vogel tries to work out a coherent, materialist Marxist feminism. What Marxist elements, if any, does she omit, and with what theoretical cost? Can you think of a Marxist approach to gender that would in your view be more adequate than either Vogel or Engels?
12. O'Connor argues that the conditions of production and their depletion under capitalism are a crucial element of crisis in capitalist society. What are the implications of his theory for other dimensions of Marxism, such as class formation, consciousness, and/or praxis? Compare O'Connor with at least one other Marxist writer on this question, and take a position.
13. Dirlik urges Marxists to take what appear to be non-class struggles (e.g., race, gender, nation) more seriously. Yet he does so as a Marxist, who still believes that class remains crucial to analysis and struggle. Relate his analysis of class to that of Marx as systematically as you can, and develop your own position about the merits of Dirlik's approach.
14. Critique one or more of the theorists we have studied this semester from Elster's standpoint. Relate that theorist's response. Then take a position on the debate.
15. Choose an issue of concern to you. State briefly your own analysis of it and, if you like, any views you may have about practice in relation to it. Then show how one or more of the theorists we have studied in the second half of the semester — Lenin, Gramsci, Vogel, O'Connor, Elster or Dirlik — would support, amend, or challenge your position. Finally, reevaluate your original position.
16. Compose your own question, discuss it with me (an essential step), and then respond to it in writing.