

Oberlin College  
Department of Politics

**FIRST YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM 138: CLASS**

Fall 2009

Professor Marc Blecher

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Office hours: T Th 3:00-4:00 & W 3:30-4:00

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Class meets Tuesday and  
Thursday, 1:30-2:45,  
Rice 100B



*"The flight time today is five hours in first class  
and twelve and a half in coach."*

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Class is no longer part of our national conversation the way identities — *e.g.*, ethnicity gender, race, nation, sexuality — are. Yet it involves at least as much — and, arguably, even more — exploitation, oppression and inequality. In FYSP 138 we redress (and explain) this lacuna. We ask what class is, utilizing anthropological, economic, political, psychological and sociological perspectives. We analyze cases from various locales and moments. Finally, students produce research papers honing in on an aspect of class that interests them.

Before each class I expect you to complete readings for the day. In class the material cannot be covered 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 I and your classmates have to say, or to contribute much if anything yourself. You will, moreover, feel lost.

An effective tool for learning is the Blackboard computerized blog. We will be making intensive and regular use of it, so please learn it by the end of our first week. You can find Blackboard at: <http://oncampus.oberlin.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp> We will use Blackboard in several ways.

§ Once each week I expect you to respond briefly in writing on the blog to questions that I will pose for each session. Specifically, those of you with surnames beginning with the letters A-M will do so by the end of Monday (for Tuesday's class), and those of you with surnames beginning with the letters N-Z will do so the end of Wednesday (for Thursday's class). I ask this just to assure that we will have a critical mass of posts for each class. But if you are in the A-M group and you miss your deadline, please post a reply for the Wednesday one; likewise, if you are in N-Z but you prefer to post earlier in the week, that's also fine. 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 can post questions — factual or interpretive — that arise as you do each session's reading. I and other members of the class may respond to your questions right on the discussion board, and I will do so in the subsequent class.

§ Each day shortly before class, I expect you to prepare by taking a few moments to log in to the discussion board to read what everyone has written.

You will also write two open-book, take-home essays and one research paper 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, the essay topics I used in the previous offering of the course appear below. The research paper demands that you apply some of what you have learned to an investigation of a subject of interest to you. Elizabeth Garza, our writing tutor, will be available to help you write great papers.

I will factor the various aspects of your work into my evaluation according to the following weightings:

Weekly blogs and quality (not quantity) of class participation	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 responsibilities for the course were unpleasantly surprised at the end of the semester. ☹

A little-known but alarming indicator of the decadent condition of American capitalist society is that each year we spend five times as much on dog food as on college

books. FYSP 138 is doing its part to right our priorities. Please purchase the following books, which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore:

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*

The New York Times, *Class Matters*

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*

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

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts* (student edition)

Michaël Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*

\_\_\_\_\_, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?*

Two of our readings are on reserve (both print reserve and Eres), all indicated in the schedule below. You can find Eres at: <http://eres.cc.oberlin.edu/eres/courseindex.aspx?error=&page=search> The Eres password is FYSP138 (and it is case-specific).

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## Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

### September 1: Course Introduction

### September 3: Theory: What Does Class Mean? I

Anthony Giddens and David Held, eds., *Classes, Power and Conflict*, pp. 3-7, 9-11, 12-39, 60-85 (on reserve and Eres)

### September 8: Theory: What Does Class Mean? II

Michaël Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, chapter 2

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts*, chapter 1

### September 10: Class in the US I

The New York Times, *Class Matters*, chapters 1-4, 6-8

### September 15: Class in the US II; first essay topics distributed

The New York Times, *Class Matters*, chapters 9-14

### September 17: Class in the US (and other advanced capitalist countries) III

Zweig, *Majority*, chapters 1 & 3

Wright, chapter 2.

### September 22: Class in the US IV

Wright, chapters 3-5.

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, chapter 2 (on reserve and Eres)

### September 24: Class in the US (cf. Japan and Sweden) V

Wright, chapter 11 (eleven)

**SEPTEMBER 27, NOON: FIRST ESSAY DUE**

September 29: The Working Class I: Political Economy

Zweig, *Majority*, chapter 4

Zweig, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?* Part 3

October 1: The Working Class II: Social Psychology (a)

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, pp. 1-150

October 6: The Working Class, III: Social Psychology (b)

Sennett and Cobb, pp. 151-271

October 8: The Working Class IV: Experience (a)

Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, pp. 1-119

October 13: The Working Class V: Experience (b)

Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, pp. 121-221

October 15: Class and Gender I

Zweig, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?*, pp. 23-34

Wright, chapters 6 & 7

October 27: Class and Gender II

Wright, chapters 8 & 9

October 29: Class and Race

Zweig, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?*, pp. 35-60

November 3: Class and Young Adults; second essay topics distributed

Zweig, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?*, part 4

November 5: Class, Ideology and Politics

Zweig, *Majority*, chapters 5, 6, 8.

Second essay topics distributed

November 10: Class and Globalization

Zweig, *Majority*, chapter 7

Zweig, ed., *What's Class Got to Do With It?*, part 2

November 12: Discussion of papers

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 4:30 PM: SECOND ESSAY DUE AT MY OFFICE.**

November 17: No class; individual meetings on research papers

November 19: Meeting with library reference staff on research strategies - Mudd 113

November 24: No class; individual meetings on research papers

December 1: Class presentations of paper drafts

December 3: Class presentations of paper drafts

December 8: Class presentations of paper drafts

December 10: Conclusion

**DECEMBER 16, 4:30: FINAL DRAFTS DUE**

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

### **FIRST ESSAY TOPIC**

Choose an issue of interest to you related to class. Discuss how a Weberian would approach it: how to formulate the question, what analytical concepts to use, how to connect them into hypotheses, and what kind of evidence to seek. Do the same for a modern Marxist (*i.e.*, one who had read not just the master but also Wright). Then show how each would critique the other. Finally, if you have a position, state and defend it briefly.

## SECOND ESSAY TOPICS

1. Do the arguments and findings advanced by Sennett and Cobb correspond to the ways of thinking of low-paid workers described by Ehrenreich (in *Nickel and Dimed*)? Why or why not? (Possible analytical factors include but are not limited to pay levels [decently paid {Sennett and Cobb}] vs. low paid [Ehrenreich]), working conditions, gender, or anything else you find to be important. If the differences between Marxian and Weberian theoretical traditions help you, use them as well.) What is at stake here?
2. Compare the psychological mechanisms found in the working class (by Sennett and Cobb) and the middle class (by Ehrenreich [*Fear of Falling*]), accounting for the difference and evaluating its significance.
3. Discuss some significant aspect(s) of the relationship of class and gender, drawing on Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimed*) but grounding your analysis firmly in Wright, in particular chapter six.
4. Discuss some significant aspect(s) of the relationship of class and race, grounding your analysis firmly in an adaptation of Wright, chapter six.
5. The lower classes described Zweig, Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimed*) and Frank might be expected to politicize their economic discontent. Yet none do. Frank offers an explicit theory about this. Ehrenreich does not offer a clear theory, but she does provide a good deal of evidence that points in a different direction. Zweig, by contrast, argues that some politicization is beginning to take place, and he tries to be hopeful about the future. Drawing on all these works, evaluate the extent of working class political mobilization, explain the reasons for the level the political mobilization (or lack thereof) that you find, and discuss the prospects for the future.
6. In what ways do changes in the economic structure of capitalism from Fordism to flexible accumulation (described in Yates [in Zweig, ed.], albeit without those terms, and also in our class) affect changes in class structure, class relations and/or class politics?
7. Does working class culture as described in various readings differ systematically from middle class culture? How, why, and with what implications?
8. Marx, Weber, Wright and you are discussing an issue of interest to you from any of our readings since the first essay. What is everyone saying? (You can write this in essay form as a summary of their positions, or as an actual transcript of their conversation.)