

Oberlin College
Department of Politics

Politics 239: Marxian Theory

Spring 2023

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[Website](#)

Office hours: Tuesdays, 3:00-5:00, (sign up [here](#)) and by appointment, at [my home](#) or on [Zoom](#)

Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays, 9:00-9:50 AM, AJLC I20 (Hallock Auditorium)

Discussions: Mondays, 10:00-10:50 AM, 3:20-4:20 PM, and 4:30-5:20 PM, all in AJLC I02A



Karl Marx, Oberlin Class of 1837, age 21



A man makes his chains with the tools he is given.

— Sting (riffing on Hegel)

Politics 239 is a survey of Marxian theory from Marx and Engels to the present. We begin, of course, with in-depth study of the work of the masters. We proceed next to the work of some of the leading Marxian thinkers and political activists of the early twentieth century: Lenin, Gramsci, and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Finally, we take up examples of contemporary theoretical developments in Marxian feminism, crisis theory, and alternatives to capitalism.

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

Reading will consist entirely of primary sources, *i.e.*, the work of Hegel, Marx and leading Marxians 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 our priorities right. Please purchase the following books, which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore *inter alia*:

Bernstein, Eduard, *The Preconditions of Socialism*
 Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*
 Harvey, David, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*
 Scott, Helen, ed., *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*
 Strunk, William, and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*
 Tucker, Robert C. ed., *The Lenin Anthology*
 _____, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*

All 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 urge Strunk and White even on good writers; we all need help writing. In your papers, I expect you to achieve a measure of the limpid elegance that they counsel (and which you can find each week gracing the pages of *The New Yorker*, which E. B. White edited when he wasn't out writing *Charlotte's Web*).

We will be reading portions of the following books, so you would benefit from owning them. But they are also available on Reserve and Blackboard.

Bronner, Stephen and D. Kellner eds., *Critical Theory and Society*
 Vogel, Lise, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*
 (out of print, but available from good used book dealers)
 Wright, Erik Olin, *Envisioning Real Utopias*

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

I. Lectures

A. I will distribute my lecture notes before class, in the hope that they will help you grasp the reading. Naturally, they cannot possibly substitute for our texts.

II. Blogs: We have two kinds of blogs: one set to encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help me calibrate the lectures and engage your questions and ideas in them; and another set to help prepare for discussions.

A. Reading and lecture-oriented blogs: I'm asking you to write one each week, but on different days: those of you with surnames beginning A-M please do yours by each Sunday evening at 10 PM; those of you with surnames beginning N-Z please do yours by each Tuesday evening at 10 PM. Please observe this deadline, because that's when I need them to prepare for class.

a) The Sunday/Tuesday division is purely arbitrary, just to help me get about half of them each class. Feel free to switch days as you need to.

- b) I take this aspect of the course very seriously; as you'll see below, they count for 40% of your grade. (But also see page 4 for more on the bourgeois hegemony of grading.)
- (1) I use these blogs to promote your learning, 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**. Huh? I simply expect you to do them seriously and regularly. If you do 13 of them (which is an average of one per week), you've earned an "A" for that 40%.
 - (2) These blogs are a process, not a product; the whole point is to help you learn by doing them week-in, week-out, not at the end of the term in order to meet a requirement. So, while I always try my best to be flexible and accommodate students' needs, it won't work for you to make up missed blogs at the end of the term.
 - (3) If during the term you fall a bit behind, which can surely happen for all sorts of understandable reasons, just double up in a subsequent week to catch up.
- I. The blogs ask you to respond to questions I will have posed on the lecture notes for the previous class. They also invite you to raise your own issues, and provide an opportunity to comment on what classmates have written. Start a debate!
 2. If you have the chance, in the late evening or early morning before class, or even as you're doing your own reading, it can help to take a few moments to read what everyone has written. Students have found that this really helps them grasp the material (and feel less insecure about their own grasp of it).
- B. Optional discussion blogs
1. I'll also post an optional blog each week where you can post questions you'd like to discuss during our weekly discussion sections (see §III below). They are also due by Sunday at 10 PM.
 2. I will not tabulate these like the reading blogs. In the language of *Das Kapital*, they have use value but no exchange value.
- III. Discussions. Please prepare to participate in our discussions by:
1. reviewing the week's reading and lecture notes;
 2. reading your classmates' blogs for that week; and
 3. laying out on the discussion blog the questions and issues you'd like us to tackle.

IV. Papers: You will write two take-home, open-book essays of around 1,250 words (\approx 6 pages). That may sound short, but remember what Pascal said: “*Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.*” (“I would have written a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time.”) The papers will challenge you to grapple with and comment critically and creatively on 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, starting on page 6 you will find the essay questions used in the previous offering of the course. Many of the same issues will be treated, perhaps with some of the same or very similar questions.

All this is pretty arduous. As Marx said in the Preface to the French edition of *Das Kapital*, with condescension befitting a German living in London addressing the French: “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 for the benefit of the labor market — 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 reading blogs	40%
Papers	30% each
Quality (not quantity) of contribution to class and discussion blogs	A “fudge factor”

Please take careful note of these proportions. As noted above, the 40% blog figure reflects my conviction that the weekly 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 were often unhappily surprised at the end of the semester, and I was unhappy to be the agent of that. 😞

You can 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's greatest works, and a search engine that is useful in looking up important terms and passages. But it will not make a good substitute for the assigned books, which contain the key selections we will be reading and have paginations that match the syllabus.

The same “reform” movement that is ruining primary and secondary education is now taking aim at us, requiring faculty to list “learning goals” for all courses. These are being used to measure what we're doing, all the better to encourage still further the growing hegemony of market forces in education (as Gramsci will help us understand). Thus, I am obliged to tell you that the goal of *Marxian Theory* is for you to learn about Marxian theory, to ask some very big questions, and to get some instruction and practice in reading, writing and thinking systematically.

Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

N.b. Much of our schedule is organized weekly, not daily. During those times, it's not possible to specify precisely which reading we'll be able to cover on which day of the week. In general, though, we'll take the readings in the order they're listed below. And of course you have two days between Mondays and Wednesdays but five between Wednesdays and Mondays, so it will be a good idea to get most of the reading done in advance during that longer interval.

January 30-February I: Marx I

Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 3-6, 26-105 (Preface to *Critique of Political Economy*; *On the Jewish Question*; *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*)

February 6-8: Marx II

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 136-200 (selections from *Holy Family*, *Poverty of Philosophy*; *Theses on Feuerbach*, *German Ideology*), 469-501, 579-593 (*Communist Manifesto*; *Working-Class Manchester* (Engels); *Class Struggle in France*)

***N.b.* Because of a serious medical procedure in my family, I must be in New York on February 8. We will meet on Zoom. 😊**

February 13-20: Marx III

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 294-442 (Selections from *Das Kapital*)

February 22-27: Marx IV

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 594-652 (*18th Brumaire*; *Civil War in France*), 522-548, 653-677 (*Critique of the Gotha Program* and other polemics; *Imperialism in India*; *Social Relations in Russia*)

***N.b.* I must be out of the country this February 20 & 22. We will meet on Zoom. 😊**

February 22: First paper topics distributed

March I - 6: first half of March 6: Engels

Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 681-717 (mostly *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*), 718-768 (miscellaneous, plus selections from *Origins of Family, Private Property and the State*)

March 6 (second half) - March 8: Revisionism (Bernstein) and Orthodoxy (Luxemburg)

Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 1-28, 47-56, 98-159, 189-210; recommended: 159-188.

Scott, ed., *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*, 41-104 (*Reform or Revolution*), 111-119, 140-150, 161-181 (selections from *The Mass Strike*)

March 11, 8:00 AM: first papers due (via e-mail)

March 13-15: Lenin I

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 12-114 (*What Is To Be Done?*), 311-398 (*The State and Revolution*)

March 27-29: Lenin II

Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology*, 550-618 (*Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*), 204-274 (*Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*)

April 3-5: Gramsci I

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 3-43, 123-157, 321-343.

April 10-12: Gramsci II

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 169-185, 229-247, 257-264, 277-318.

April 17: Critical Theory

Bronner and Kellner, eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, 52-57 (Horkheimer), 58-74 (Marcuse), 119-127 (Marcuse), 128-135 (Adorno), 213-218 (Fromm), 255-263 (Benjamin), 276-287 and 288-291 (Marcuse) (on Blackboard)

April 19: Women and Men

Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, chs. 10 & 11 (on Blackboard)

April 24: Environment

James O'Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Environmental Marxism*, chs. 7 & 8 (on Blackboard)

April 26-May 1: Contemporary Crisis Theory

Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*

Lanchester, "The Robots are Coming" (on Blackboard)

Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?" (on Blackboard)

Second paper topics distributed

May 3: Alternatives to Capitalism

Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, chapters 6, 7, 9, 10

May 11, 11:00 AM: Second paper due

ESSAY QUESTIONS FROM
THE LATEST OFFERING OF THE COURSE

First Essay Topics

1. To what extent 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? In what ways might the former add something to the latter? In either case, is anything lost in the move from alienated labor to exploitation? What are the implications, for theory and/or practice?
2. How essential is Marx's economic theory of capitalism to Marxian 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 the rest of his theory, and if so, how? What are the implications, for theory and/or practice?
3. 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/or how exploitation leads ineluctably to the destruction of the capitalist system (though you don't need to write about all of those). Stick to the theoretical level here rather than discussing Marx's ability to explain or predict the workings of actual capitalist economies. *N.b.* While question #2 invites you to analyze the importance of Marx's economic theory for his theory generally, this one asks you to write an internal critique of his economic theory.
4. What are the essential elements of Marx's theory of history? What does it attack? What are its strengths? Its limitations and/or contradictions? On this last question, how would Marx respond? How would you? What are the implications, for theory and/or practice?
5. Sum up Marx's and, if you like, Engels'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, if you like, Engels) specify those conditions? What are the consequences of each theory, for theory and for practice? These are just suggestions, though; you may well think of other, better lines of analysis and critique, of course.
6. 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? For practice?
7. "Marx's critique of ideology, and indeed his whole base/superstructure distinction, are inherently self-destructive, for they can form the basis of a the critique of Marx's theory itself." (D. Gustibus 😊) How would Marx respond? Discuss critically the issues that matter, and their implications for theory and/or practice.
8. Was Marx consistent 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, and drawing out the implications for theory and/or practice. You may especially want to think about issues of class consciousness and motivation for collective action.

9. 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 for theory and/or practice?

10. In what ways is Engels's 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?

11. In what ways is Engels's 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?

12. 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 and/or Gramsci's views on this subject into play. What's at stake here?

2. "Lenin applied Marxian theory to a material and historical setting very different from the one Marx had in mind. This produced a major distortion of Marxian theory, and serious problems for the practice of state socialism in Russia and beyond." — Kurt Remarque
Comment, explicating Lenin's position, and then taking your own.

3. Compare at least two from among Bernstein, Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci on the subject of the bourgeois state and representative democracy, keeping Marx in view. Could various elements of their theories be combined into a more satisfactory one? What difference could it have then? Could it have implications today?

4. What, if anything, does Lenin's theory lack because 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 Luxemburg and/or Gramsci say? Why does it matter?

6. Gramsci goes beyond the more traditional materialist Marxian 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, or a bit of both? What's at stake here?

7. Compare Gramsci and Lenin on revolutionary organization and strategy, and discuss the implications. Issues could include: the role of intellectuals, the party, the appropriate and inappropriate historical and material contexts for revolution, the obstacles to be overcome, or the question of democracy.

8. Gramsci's revolutionary temper was tersely expressed in the maxim "pessimism of

the intellect, optimism of the will". Elaborate what he meant here in his own terms. Does this have roots in Marxian theory? Think in terms of the dialectic between structure and action. What are the political implications?

9. How do Lenin and Gramsci differ in their concepts of intellectual activity and of the intellectual? Try to address one or more of the following questions: 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? Do their conceptions of political action differ fundamentally?

10. For Gramsci, hegemony comes in two flavors: force and consent. Lenin seems to emphasize force as the essence of politics — the bourgeoisie exercise it, and the proletariat does too after the revolution. Gramsci seems to emphasize consent; and it's certainly a new idea in the Marxian canon. But do you see bases for it in Marx and even Lenin? (For example, you might also think in terms of the similarity and difference between consent [Gramsci] and "false consciousness" [Lenin].) Compare their views and discuss the implications.

11. Discuss the relationship of class ("in itself") and consciousness in Lenin and Gramsci, with reference to Marx. Take a position on the issues you uncover, and explain why they matter.

12. Vogel tries to work out a coherent, materialist Marxian feminism grounded in the reproduction of the labor force rather than the property relations that Engels emphasized. Compare their approaches in terms of what they best explain and miss, and of the implications of each approach. Take a position if you like. What's at stake here?

13. Is Marxian theory a "science"? What does being a "science" imply about the intellectual and practical content of Marxian thought? Discuss critically with respect to Lenin and then either Gramsci and/or one critical theorist, while also referencing Marx and Engels. Why does any of this matter?

14. Some theorists in the second part of the course emphasize elements of the superstructure or advocate blurring the distinction between base and superstructure, while others insist on the primacy of the material base. Is departure from a base/superstructure distinction a strength or limitation under late-modern capitalism? To what extent is it a departure from Marx? Write with reference to several contrasting texts, and address the implications.

15. The critical theorists (e.g., Marcuse) urge Marxians to take what appear to be non-class struggles more seriously. Yet they do so as "Marxians" who still believe that class remains crucial to analysis and struggle. Relate their analyses of class to that of Marx, developing your own position about the merits of their approaches, and ruminate on why this matters.

16. David Harvey writes: "The mode of approach I have adopted is somewhat unconventional in that it follows Marx's method but not necessarily his prescriptions..." Where does he depart from the master, where does he not, and with what implications?

17. Compare Harvey with either Lanchester and/or Streeck on crisis, keeping Marx in

view. Think in terms of their approach, their specific analyses, and the implications of their arguments for theory and practice.

18. Compare Marx with Gramsci and/or critical theory and/or Harvey on humanism and/or alienation. What are the implications of your analysis?

19. What is specifically Marxian about Harvey's and Wright's discussions of the practice of pursuing alternatives to capitalism? Is their Marxian grounding a strength or weakness? What's at stake?

20. 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 would support, amend, or challenge your position, while also keeping Marx in view. Finally, reevaluate your original position.

21. Compare two or more of the theorists we have covered in the second half of the course on the dialectic of subject and object, keeping Marx in view. Take a position if you like. What is at stake here?

22. Compose your own question, discuss it with me (an essential step), and then respond to it in writing, ending with a discussion of the implications.