

Oberlin College  
Department of Politics

## FIRST YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM 094: DAS KAPITAL

Fall 2021

Professor Marc Blecher

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 3:00-5:00 (sign up [here](#)) and by appointment, all on [Zoom](#).

Class meets Tuesday  
and Thursday,  
8:35-9:50 AM, Wilder 211



The first edition



Karl Marx, Oberlin Class of 1839

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 about political economy 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, which we all seem to treat as if it were as natural and inevitable as the sunrise, that focuses on causes and effects. Of course we will also learn what Marx had to say about commodities, markets, value, labor, "exploitation", social relations, mystification (the process by which capitalism systematically obscures its inner forms and relationships), capitalism's (only apparently) contradictory resilience and proneness to crisis, and much else.

The seminar will involve four different learning formats. We will read *Das Kapital* carefully, aided by David Harvey's companion volume. You can also view or listen to his online lectures (<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. And of course you will also write three essays.

*Das Kapital* involves economics, history, philosophy, political science and sociology. As such, we might call it inter-disciplinary. But in Marx's day there were no distinct "disciplines" as we now know them, so it would better to 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. 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 demolishes the very notion of "value free social science" and provides 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 own approaches for imbibing *Das Kapital*. Oberlin first-year students have delighted me (as I know they would David Harvey) by preferring the original text to Harvey's book and lectures, which are no substitute for Marx's own rich work. But whether you take up Marx 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, though I still want you to read and/or listen to Harvey because he makes important points that Marx does not.

Blogging is essential to FYSP 094.

§ To encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help me calibrate what we do in class, once each week I expect you to write on Blackboard a short response to questions I will have posed in advance about the works we are confronting. You're also welcome 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.

§ Blogs are due at 9 PM on Monday evenings. Please observe this deadline, because that's when I need them to prepare for class.

§ I use the 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. But because I view them as very important for your learning, I do factor heavily into your final grade simply whether you have done them seriously and regularly. If you do 13 of them (which is an average of one per week), you've got an "A" for 40% of the course. (See the page [Bookmark "Grading" is missing.] below.)

§ Moreover, the 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.

§ In the evening or early morning before class, please prepare by taking 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).

You will also write three open-book, take-home essays of approximately 1,250 words (~5 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 6 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. Kendall Mahavier, 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	40%
Papers	20% each
Quality (not quantity) of contributions to discussion	A "fudge factor"

Please take careful note of these proportions. They reflect my conviction that the daily process of the course is roughly 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.

David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*

Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (tr. Ben Fowkes; New York: Penguin)

N.b. Please purchase only this edition, as we need to have uniform pagination.

Finally, please locate [David Harvey's 2007 lectures on Capital](#). There is a 2019 set as well, but it is slightly less complete, so we will not be using it.

## Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

### October 5-7: Course Introduction; The Commodity

Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, chapters 1 & 2

Harvey, Introduction and chapters 1 & 2

Screen or listen to Classes 1 & 2

N.b. Don't be put off by references Harvey 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. The goal here is to draw a bead on the contexts they provide for Marx.

### October 12-14: Money

Marx, chapter 3

Harvey, chapter 2

Screen or listen to Class 3

### October 19-21: From Capital to Labor Power

Marx, chapters 4-6

Harvey, chapter 3

Screen or listen to Class 4

October 21: first paper topics distributed

### October 26-28: The Labor Process and the Production of Surplus Value

Marx, chapters 7-9

Harvey, chapter 4

Screen or listen to Class 5

### October 30, Noon: First paper due

### November 2-4: The Working Day

Marx, chapters 10-11

Harvey, chapter 5

Screen or listen to Class 6

### November 9-11: Relative Surplus Value

Marx, chapters 12-14

Harvey, chapter 6

Screen or listen to Class 7. Be sure to tune in to the first 41 minutes. Toward the end it contains important material not discussed in Marx but still relevant to it.

November 16-18: Technology

Marx, chapter 15, sections 1-3

Harvey, chapter 7

Screen or listen to Class 8

November 18: Second paper topics distributed

November 30-December 2: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry, 1

Marx, chapter 15, sections 4-7

Harvey, pages 213-225.

Screen or listen to Class 9 through 41:00

December 7-9: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry, 2

Marx, chapter 15, sections 8-10

Harvey, pages 225-235.

Screen or listen to Class 9 through from 41:00 to the end.

December 11, Noon: Second paper due

December 14-16: From Surplus Value to Capital Accumulation

Marx, chapters 16-24

Harvey, chapter 9

Screen or listen to Class 10

December 21-January 4: Capitalist Accumulation (January 4 on Zoom)

Marx, chapter 25

Harvey, chapter 10

Screen or listen to Class 11

January 6-11: Primitive Accumulation (on Zoom)

Marx, chapters 26-33

Harvey, chapter 11 and pages 315-343

Screen or listen to Class 12

January 6: Third paper topics distributed

January 13: Conclusion (on Zoom)

Harvey, pages 315-343

Screen or listen to Class 13

January 20, 9:00 PM: Third paper due

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

### First Essay Topics

1. What, if anything, does Marx gain in explanatory power from the labor theory of value (*i.e.*, the proposition that the value of a commodity = the average socially necessary labor time it took to produce it)? What, if anything, does he lose? In what ways do the gains and losses matter? For example, do the losses — such as the exclusion of other concepts of value — undermine or contradict the gains in some way?
2. Choose one or two examples (or more if you like) from *Capital* thus far of dialectical argumentation — the decomposition of a concept into its parts, the analysis of their contradictory relationship, and their ultimate recomposition into a more complex, tension-filled whole. What, if anything, does this approach reveal about the concept or issue in question? What, if anything, does it miss or confound? How is it different from other forms of explanation to which you are accustomed?
3. Consider one or more examples of the fetish. What use does Marx make of it? What does it reveal? Are you persuaded?
4. What is the significance of Marx's argument about money — specifically, his view that it is a fetish, and also that it is limitless? Are you persuaded?
5. Is Marx's argument fundamentally materialist? If you believe so, consider one or more examples of how it starts with the material world to explain our ideas rather than the other way around. If you believe it is fundamentally idealist despite its materialist appearance, argue as much. Or if you believe it mixes both approaches, show how. Whatever you argue, what is the significance of this question?
6. What does Marx have to say about how capitalist wage labor differs from labor in general? What's at stake here? What's political about it? And is his argument idealist, materialist or some of both?
7. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.

### Second Essay Topics

1. Respond to the first two and then at least one more, please. (The last "one" is actually three, of course.)

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? Does this theory provide for you a new way to look at work and capitalism since Marx's day, including our own time? If so, why and how? If not, why not?

2. 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?
3. Compare the various ways in which capitalists induce workers to produce surplus value. What's at stake in making these distinctions?
4. In chapter ten, Marx offers some elements of a theory of the state, and Harvey embellishes them (in sections highlighted on the syllabus). What are they? How are they different from standard liberal theories that we hear all the time? What is their significance for capitalism and for the working class?
5. What is Harvey making out of footnote four? Analyze one or more ways Marx uses his points there (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 what's at stake here?
6. Marx is arguing that the rise of machines represents a qualitatively new phase of capitalism. Evaluate his argument critically. What are the implications, both historically and at present or even into the foreseeable future?
7. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.

### Third Essay Topics

1. In chapter 15, Marx developed a theory of the effects of technological change on the labor process, the worker, and the generation and extraction of surplus value. In chapter 25 he develops a theory of the effects of technological change on the reproduction of capitalism generally and on the working class as a whole. Are they consistent? What are the implications for the capitalist system as it has developed up to the present?
2. Evaluate Marx's argument that workers produce not just commodities and surplus value but capitalism itself, both as a political economy and from a moral point of view.
3. What is Marx's theory of capitalist 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? To what extent is its explanatory power limited? (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.) The emphasis here is on how you use Marx much more than how well you analyze the problem you choose (which may, of course, be approached from many other angles as well).

6. Screen [episode 3 of \*Masters of Money\*](#). Use your understanding of *Das Kapital* to evaluate it critically. What did it get right? But more centrally, choose one or more important points that it missed, oversimplified, overemphasized, underemphasized, or even distorted. Explicate them, and show why they matter. Please be sure to touch on some of the material since chapter 15, but also feel free to range across the whole book.
7. Develop your own topic, clear it with me, and then write on it.