Is Karl Marx Still Relevant?

[provisional syllabus]

Freshman Honors Seminar
Tuesdays, 3:30-6 pm / Fall 2013

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Course description: There was a time not so long ago when a critical engagement with the writings of Karl Marx was considered an obligatory intellectual and political rite of passage—whether one ultimately accepted or rejected Marx’s ideas, in whole or in part. No serious intellectual or political activist could not read Marx. Is this still true? Are Marx’s ideas, or some of them, still relevant? Which of his ideas remain important or valuable for people who wish to understand—and perhaps to change—the contemporary world? Which of Marx’s ideas are problematic or passé? To address these questions, students in this course will critically examine some of Marx’s most important writings, including The German Ideology, The Communist Manifesto, The Civil War in France, and—above all—Capital, Marx’s magnum opus. To better understand his ideas, students will also read about the historical and biographical context in which Marx wrote.

Course requirements and grading: Students are expected to attend all class sessions, having read some often very difficult texts and prepared to participate in class discussions. (If you cannot attend a class session for some reason, please be sure to notify me by e-mail, in advance if possible.) Participation in class discussions, including occasional class presentations, will count for 20 percent of one’s final grade. Eight two-page essays (double-spaced) on the assigned weekly readings (from Week 2 to 13) will together count for 50 percent of one’s grade, and a final 8-page essay (for Week 14) will count for the remaining 30 percent of one’s grade.

Required readings: We will read substantial portions of The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker (W.W. Norton, 1978), and Mary Gabriel, Love & Capital: Karl & Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution (Back Bay Books, 2011), both of which are on reserve at Bobst Library and are available in paperback at Shakespeare & Co. Bookstore, located at Broadway and Washington Place. Other readings will be made available to students.

Class format: We will roughly follow this schedule for each class session:
• “First hour” (3:30 to 4:30 pm): This hour will provide students with “food for
thought”—in the form of a video, lecture, guest lecture, etc.—that supplements the assigned readings for the week.

- Break (4:30 to 4:45 pm)
- “Second hour” (4:45 to 6 pm): During this “hour” we will discuss the assigned reading for the week, initiated by one or more student presentation.

Course outline:

Week 1. September 7. Introduction to the course. (No readings.)

Week 2. September 14. The young Marx

Required reading: Gabriel, Love & Capital, Prologue, chapters 1-10 (pp. 5-104).

Week 3. September 21. Marx’s “materialist conception of history”

Required reading: “Marx on the History of His Opinions” (Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) [1859], “Theses on Feuerbach” [1845], and excerpts from The German Ideology (Pt. 1) [1845-46]; in Tucker, ed. (pp. 3-6, 143-145, 146-175).

Week 4. September 28. Marx the revolutionary

Required reading: Gabriel, Love & Capital, chapters 11-20 (pp. 105-200).

Week 5. October 5. The Communist Manifesto

Required reading: “Manifesto of the Communist Party” [1848], in Tucker, ed. (pp. 473-500).

Week 6. October 12. Marx in exile and Das Kapital

Required reading: Gabriel, Love & Capital, chapters 27-33 (pp. 272-370).
Week 7. October 19. Marx’s critique of capitalism I: The labor theory of value and “commodity fetishism”


Week 8. October 26. Marx’s critique of capitalism II: Exploitation and the class struggle over work

Required reading: *Capital*, Vol. 1 [1867], chapters 4, 6-7, 10, and 12, in Tucker, ed. (pp. 329-384).

Week 9. November 2. Marx’s critique of capitalism III: Capital accumulation and its consequences


Week 10. November 9. Marx and the American Civil War


Week 11. November 16. The Paris Commune and Marx


Week 12. November 23. Marx on the Paris Commune and “the dictatorship of the proletariat”

Required reading: *The Civil War in France* [1871], in Tucker, ed. (pp. 618-652).

Week 13. November 30. Marx’s last years

Week 14. December 7. Summing up: So is Marx still relevant?


Students’ final 8-page essay is due at the final class meeting.

*Final essay assignment:* Which of Marx’s ideas (if any) do you think are especially relevant and illuminating today, and why? Which (if any) do you find especially problematic or passé, and why? (Don’t try to discuss too many ideas. Focus on four or five big ideas that you think are especially relevant and/or problematic.)