

Fall 2016

Instructor: Jon Elster

MARX SEMINAR POLS UN3911

The seminar will discuss the following works by Karl Marx:

*Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts**

*Theses on Feuerbach**

*Selections from The German Ideology**

*Preface to A Critique of Political Economy**

*Critique of the Gotha Program.**

The Class Struggles in France

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

Articles on British politics (will be uploaded to Courseworks)

*The Civil War in France**

Capital (vol. I)

The focus will be on a close reading of Marx's philosophical, historical, and economic writings. The starred selections are available in D. McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (SW). This book, as well as *The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *Capital I*, will be available at Book Culture. No secondary literature will be required, although Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (also at Book Culture) is recommended as background reading. Although it will be possible to answer the questions on the take-home exam on the basis of *Capital* and the other works and selections listed above, it is recommended that you also read the selections in SW not listed above.

The class meets Monday 4.10-6. There will be no class on October 3. A make-up class will be scheduled later.

There will be a take home exam, with questions handed out on the last day of classes, December 12. Answers are due by noon on December 20 (submit them to je70@columbia.edu). The questions will be taken from three question sets. For the take-home exam, the instructor will select four questions from each set. Of these, students have to answer two of the questions relating to *Capital* and one question from each of the other two question sets (four answers altogether). If a given question refers to more than one work, you are

free to count your answer as relating to any one of them. Students can also volunteer to make a 20-minute presentation in class on some topic approved by the instructor. Those who choose to take this option will only have to answer two questions on the take-home exam, one on *Capital* and one from either of the other question sets. They will also have to hand in the written paper for their class presentation.

Readings by Weeks (approximate)

Week 1: **Introduction and overview** (Ch. 1 of Elster, *Introduction*, is recommended).

Week 2: **Alienation**. McClellan, pp. 85-120 + 400-405.

Week 3: **Historical materialism**. McClellan, pp.175-208 + 424-27.

Week 4: **Historical materialism**. McClellan, pp. 175-208 + 424-27 (continued)

Week 5: **Exploitation and justice**. McClellan pp. 610-16 + *Capital* pp. 643-82.

Week 6: **The Class Struggles in France**

Week 7: **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, Articles on British Politics**

Week 8: **The Paris Commune**. McClellan pp. 584-603

Week 9: **Capital** (Introduction: No readings)

Week 10: **Capital**, pp. 89-103 + 125-177.

Week 11: **Capital**, pp.178-197 + pp.247-282.

Week 12: **Capital** pp.340-411 + pp.455-491. Student presentations.

Week 13: **Capital** pp.492-642 + pp.873-930. Student presentations.

Questions for take-home exam

Question Set I: Philosophy (for *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts, Theses on Feuerbach, The German Ideology, Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* and *Critique of the Gotha Program*):

1. “Marx hesitates between viewing alienation as the lack of a sense of meaning and viewing it as the sense of a lack of meaning.” Discuss.

2. Compare Marx's conceptions of communism in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* and in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*.
3. The notion of self-realization is central in Marx's conception of the good life for man. How is that notion to be understood in his work? Why would self-realization be a good thing? Why might people nevertheless resist it?
4. Suggest an interpretation of the third Thesis on Feuerbach (SW p. 172).
5. Discuss Marx's views of religion in *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* and in *Capital*.
6. Marx writes (SW p.172) that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas". How would you go about identifying these two sets of ideas? Can you think of cases in which the identity does not hold?
7. What does Marx mean when he writes (SW p.425) that "From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations [of production] turn into their fetters"?
8. Is it possible, on the basis of *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, to assert that Marx had a theory of distributive justice?
9. Discuss Marx's periodization(s) of history.
10. What according to Marx is the relation between the political superstructure and the economic basis?

Question Set II: History (for *The Class Struggles in France*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Civil War in France*, *Articles on British politics*).

11. Compare Marx's overview of French history between 1830 and 1852 in *The Civil War in France* with his treatment of the same period in *The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
12. In what sense did the Second French Republic (1848-1851), according to Marx, "represent" the capitalist class?
13. Discuss Marx's view of bureaucracy in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *The Civil War in France*.

14. Marx writes that the French industrialists must “serve interests which are opposed to the collective interests of their class”. Discuss.

15. What is Marx’s concept of class, reconstructed from his writings on French politics and *Capital*?

16. What, according to Marx, are the conditions under which a class achieves class-consciousness?

17. Summarize and discuss Marx’s analyses of class coalitions and class struggle in England and France ca. 1850.

18. Marx writes that “the [French] bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule”. Discuss, and compare with his analysis of the British politics.

19. Summarize and discuss Marx’s analyses of the Paris Commune as a model for the self-organization of the workers.

20. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx emphasized the importance of the “idées napoléoniennes” - ideas taken over from Napoleon I - in ensuring the legitimacy of Louis Bonaparte. Is this idea compatible with the view expressed in *The German Ideology*, that ideas “have no history” of their own, but simply reflect underlying economic forces?

Question Set III: Economics (for *Capital*):

21. Summarize and discuss Marx’s analyses of commodity fetishism.

22. What do you think of the following statement: “Marx's theory of value overemphasizes costs of production, and underestimates demand conditions.”

23. How does Marx reconcile the following statements. (i) In capitalism, all goods are exchanged against goods of equivalent value. (ii) The “general formula of capital”, $M-C-M+\Delta M$, shows that capitalism is a creator of surplus value.

24. “The labor theory of value is not a scientific theory with the goal of explaining relative prices, but a political theory intended to show that since labor is the sole source of value the workers should appropriate the means of production from the capitalists.” Discuss.

25. What does Marx mean when he writes (*Capital* p.763) that “Capitalist production begets [...] its own negation. This is the negation of the negation.”
26. “Exploitation is not unjust if the surplus extracted from the workers is reinvested in new production rather than used for capitalist consumption.” Discuss.
27. Discuss Marx’s analyses of British class struggles in light of a proverb he cites in *Capital* p.830: “When thieves fall out, honest men come by their own”.
28. Discuss the following statement: “a scientific analysis of competition is possible only if we grasp the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions, which are not perceptible to the senses.” (*Capital* p.433).
29. According to Marx, modern “industry [...] makes science a potentiality for production [Produktivkraft] which is distinct from labour and presses it into the service of capital” (*Capital* p.483). Discuss.
30. Discuss Marx’s distinction between manufacture and machinery, and the social implications of the distinction.
31. Marx asserts (*Capital*, p.515 n.33) that “The field of application for machinery would [...] be entirely different in a communist society from which it is in a bourgeois society”. On what does he base this statement? Is it valid?
32. Marx writes that “machinery is the surest means of lengthening the working-day” (*Capital*, p.533). Discuss.
33. Machinery “is the most powerful weapon for repressing strikes” (*Capital*, p.562). Discuss.
34. Summarize and discuss Marx’s analyses of the English Factory Acts.
35. Discuss Marx’s claim that the classical economists are engaged in “apologies” for the capitalist system rather than in scientific analysis.