

School of Arts & Sciences Prospectus

ENGL 2403: Marx's Century

Instructor: Prof. E. Steinlight

Course Description and Level

This undergraduate seminar will introduce you to Karl Marx in the context of his century, and it will consider the nineteenth century in turn through the lens of his revolutionary social analysis. Much of our reading will focus on Marx's own writing from his years in Paris and London, including the early essays and manuscripts, the *Manifesto*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, journalism on the Indian Rebellion and on the U.S. Civil War, and substantial portions of *Capital* vol. 1. No prior knowledge is required. Reading Marx and his frequent coauthor and collaborator Friedrich Engels closely will enable us to define some key terms including the commodity, labor, surplus value, private property, alienation, ideology, materialism, and class struggle. Since Marx himself claimed to have learned more from the great realist novelists of his day than from all the politicians and moralists, we will also read a selection of nineteenth-century fiction (including some of his favorite authors, Balzac, Dickens, and Gaskell) as another avenue to understanding capitalist societies and analyzing past and present struggles. As we discuss these novels we may also reflect on the possibilities of art under capitalism. In addition, we will explore and draw on later Marxist thought by critics and activists working across many contexts and extending into our own century, including decolonial and Black Marxisms and socialist feminism. This course fulfills Sector 1 and Sector 5 of the English Standard Major as well as the pre-1900 Seminar; non-majors are also very welcome.

Readings

Students will read a wide range of Marx's writing (some in the *Marx-Engels Reader*, some from *Capital* [Penguin edition], some in electronic format from other sources) alongside contemporaneous works of fiction, including Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, as well as selections from later work by anticolonial and Black Marxists including Franz Fanon, Eric Williams, Cedric Robinson, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore and socialist feminists including Barbara Ehrenreich, Silvia Federici, and Kathi Weeks. Students will need copies of approximately 6-7 paperback books (used copies should be available at the bookstore soon and via various online sources), and any supplementary readings will be made available on Canvas.

Skills to Be Acquired

Students will gain familiarity with the work and ideas of Karl Marx and with their cultural contexts in the nineteenth century as well as with a range of literary texts from the period and some critical approaches to reading. We will read each text closely, aiming to grasp arguments and define some key terms, and sometimes with an eye toward the relationship between form and content. In addition, students will gain practice in the skills of close reading, critical analysis, and argumentation.

Class Structure

Primarily seminar-style discussion

Assignments & Requirements

Reading and active participation in class discussions (20%)

Short response post/keyword essay on Marx (15%)

Presentation/discussion leading (15%)

4-6pp paper on a novel (25%)

4-6pp final paper (25%)

Weekly Work Schedule

Class time:

During 90-minute class sessions on Tues/Thurs, students will participate actively in discussion, asking and responding to questions, exchanging ideas either in small groups or with the whole class, defining terms together, closely examining texts, and sometimes applying concepts to new contexts.

Class preparation:

On days when we are reading novels, there may be 80-100pp of reading; on days when we are reading chapters from *Capital*, other writing from Marx, or selections from later theorists and activists, readings will typically be in the range of 60pp total, depending on level of difficulty. Rather than try to complete all the reading in one sitting, students will want to split up the reading over two days (for example, reading 40-50pp of Dickens on Sunday and 40-50pp on Monday for Tuesdays' class, then 30pp of Marx on Tuesday evening and 30pp on Wednesday evening for Thursday's class). Writing assignments will be roughly equally spaced throughout the course and will typically not be due on days when the course meets to allow additional time. All due dates will be listed on the complete syllabus and on Canvas when finalized.