

# 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PHILOSOPHY: KARL MARX

PHIL 4190/6190 | GRMN 5480

## I. Seminar Description

Karl Marx is one of the most politically and intellectually influential philosophers of the modern period. Even today, in the aftermath of Soviet Communism, but also in the aftermath of the Great Recession, his ideas continue to be debated in academic circles, in the financial press, and among activists and politicians around the world. This seminar will survey most of Marx's canonical writings in roughly the order in which they were composed (occasionally with a coauthor, Friedrich Engels). Our survey will be divided into three parts.

In the first part of the seminar, we will read from Marx's early writings, many of which were never published until decades after his death and some of which may not have been intended for publication. Some interpreters have claimed to find in these writings the philosophical foundations of his mature social theory and his life-long advocacy of communist politics. Others claim that the ideas expressed by the "young" Marx would later be repudiated by the "mature" Marx. Whether either of these hermeneutical positions is borne out by the texts will be one of the overarching questions of this seminar.

The second part of the seminar will examine Marx's social theory ("historical materialism") as he developed it (sometimes with Engels) in writings spanning the late 1840s through 1860s. Marx argued that societies and social change can be best understood in terms of a tendency for the productive forces of society to develop and for those forces to periodically come into conflict with society's economic structure. Phenomena such as the political constitution of society and its prevailing religion and morality were in turn to be understood in terms of their corresponding economic structure. We will seek to understand this theory, how it purports to explain society and social change, and what consequences it would, if true, have for our self-understanding and for political practice.

The third part of the seminar will examine the theory of capitalism Marx developed in his magnum opus, *Capital*. Marx shared with classical economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo the view that labor is the source of the value of commodities. He sought, on this basis, to explain the basic features of developed capitalist economies and predicted their eventual demise. Central to Marx's theory of capitalism is a theory of exploitation: capital invested in the production process grows because the capitalist extracts more value from the worker than the worker is paid in wages. We will seek to understand this theory and, to the extent that this is possible within the confines of this seminar, to assess it. We will also ask what consequences the theory, if true, has for the ethical assessment of the main institutions of a capitalist society (particularly wage-labor and private property in the means of production).

## II. Seminar Objectives

1. *Understanding and assessment.* You will develop a working knowledge of the main theses and arguments in Marx's most influential writings. You will also reflect, if only in a partial and tentative way, on the enduring significance of those theses and arguments for our time.
2. *Working directly with the texts.* Students in lecture courses are often presented with highly refined and

contentiously interpreted versions of the views of canonical figures in the history of philosophy. In this seminar, you will frequently have the opportunity to confront raw (often fragmentary or unpublished) texts in all their complexity, and to work collaboratively with me and your peers to arrive at your own interpretation of Marx's views.

3. *Exposition and writing.* The assignments in the seminar are designed to help you develop your expository and argumentative skills in both written and oral form. You will learn to lead group discussion on the basis of "discussion papers" (see below) and you will undertake a significant writing assignment.

4. *Real talk.* The discussion-based format of the seminar will afford you the opportunity to work on your ability to do philosophy face-to-face and in real time.

### III. Teaching Method

In-person seminar activities, presentations, and discussion.

### IV. Evaluation Method

1. *Assignments* – Your grade will consist of the following components. *No extra credit will be offered in this seminar.*

Assignment		Value	Tentative length	Description/Comments
Attendance and participation		25%	-	Based on the frequency of your attendance, and on the quality and frequency of your participation during seminar.
Response papers		15%	400-500 words	A short, (almost) weekly paper responding to some significant interpretive or substantive issue raised by the assigned readings.
Discussion paper & presentation		15%	5 pages (~1250 words)	A discussion paper consists of a critical examination of views or arguments in the day's readings that is intended to deepen our engagement with those readings. You will present and then answer questions about your discussion paper for a portion of the seminar meeting to which you are assigned.
Term paper	First draft	5%	At least 8 pages (~2000 words)	A paper on a philosophical question that deals substantially with Marx's position on that question, or a scholarly paper on some disputed interpretive issue concerning Marx's philosophy.
	Final draft	40%	12 to 15 pages (~3000-3750 words)	