

# SOAN 217: Capitalism, Consumption and Culture

*Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Carleton College  
Spring 2016*

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*Class meets MWF, 3a (11:10 – 12:20pm MW; 12-1pm F) in Leighton 236*

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## Course description

With the recent financial crises, the occupy movement, and the increasing discussions of climate change, sustainability, and the “sharing economy”, our economic system has been coming under renewed scrutiny. This is indeed fitting, as the powerful and complex economic system that we refer to as “capitalism” fundamentally shapes our individual and collective lives—a fact which belies the notion that “the economy” is system that is somehow independent of the spheres of society, politics, and culture.

Understanding and critiquing our capitalist society requires an historical and theoretical approach. In this seminar we’ll build a foundation for comprehension by examining the nature and logic of capitalism. Our perspective will be grounded in the writings of Karl Marx, one the most important analysts and the preeminent critic of capitalism. We will use this “classical” foundation to explore contemporary debates about ideology, the culture of capitalism, and the continuing contradictions of the economic system.

In the second half of the term, we will use the work of Michel Foucault as a foundation to develop an account of neoliberalism as the contemporary cultural logic of capitalism. This will then allow us to grasp the complexity of our current predicament, and to better articulate the potential for moving beyond capitalist social relations, toward alternative, more just, ways of collective being.

*This syllabus is necessarily tentative; I may choose to make changes based upon the interests and needs of course participants.*

## Course objectives

Upon completion of this course, students should:

- have a very good understanding the primary critical approaches to the study of the capitalist economy
- understand articulate some of the complex ways in which politics, economics and culture are co-constituted
- have a greatly expanded vocabulary of critical social theoretical and political economic concepts

- understand what theory is, and the role it plays in both social science and social critique
- have substantially improved their skills of critical reading, thinking, and communication

### **Student learning outcomes**

Learning outcomes are specified at the department level. The relevant outcomes for this course are the following:

- Connect information about historical and contemporary socio-cultural phenomena.
- Formulate appropriate sociological and/or anthropological research questions about socio-cultural phenomena.
- Apply sociological and anthropological theory to analyze socio-cultural phenomena.
- Draw upon your understanding of historical and contemporary socio-cultural phenomena to engage the world.

### **Course Materials**

There are four required books for the course, and one recommended. All are available at the Carleton bookstore. In addition to these texts, there will frequently be required readings available on the course website.

#### Required

- Foucault, Michel (2010). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. M. Senellart (Ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006) *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heinrich, Michel (2012). *An introduction to the three volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Winnubst, Shannon (2015) *Way too cool: selling out race and ethics*. NY: Columbia University Press.

#### Recommended

- Harvey, David (2014). *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism*. NY: Oxford University Press.

### **Approach, expectations, suggestions**

The course will be conducted as a discussion-based seminar, although I may lecture from time to time. I view my professorial role to be one of facilitation, rather than knowledge dissemination. My goal is to create a context and structure to help you develop your critical intellectual skills and your knowledge of sociological theoretical approaches. The success of the course will depend upon the continued preparation, engagement and participation of all members.

#### Reading

In many ways, this is a seminar in reading. The reading load will be substantial, and the texts complex and theoretical. The reading may initially seem alien and obtuse. My goal is to help you develop your theoretical acumen, and critical reading ability goes hand-in-hand with this. There are many different styles and

strategies of reading. In this course, we're reading primary texts closely — paying attention to the development of concepts, the structure of arguments, and other rhetorical moves that the authors are making.

I certainly don't expect you to find the meanings in these readings transparent; if they were, they would most likely not be “classics” of social theory. They are rich and sophisticated enough to support multiple interpretations; however, there is a tension between the attempt to understand an author on her or his own terms, and the interpretation of their theories, concepts, or texts in a particular contemporary context. Part of reading theory is learning strategies for negotiating this tension. Fortunately or unfortunately, there is no shortcut here.

We will be referring to the texts all the time in class, and so you should always have yours with you. *I strongly discourage using ereaders*, as they (in my opinion), make active engagement with the text more difficult. Readings available on Moodle should be printed out and brought to class.

### Technology

My approach to teaching and learning is centered around discussion, engagement, community and collaboration. I have found that this approach is best facilitated by keeping technology, for the most part, out of the classroom. I expect all phones and laptops to be turned off and put away before coming into the classroom. If you have a circumstance which merits an exception to this policy, please see me about it.

### Attendance

Class attendance is mandatory. If you need to be absent for a legitimate reason, please talk to me ahead of time. You may have one unexcused absence during the term. Any additional unexcused absences will result in deductions from your final grade for the course.

### Communication and office hours

I am available for discussion and/or assistance outside of class, and I welcome student feedback, discussion, and questions. If you have any questions or concerns throughout the term, we can chat about them. *If you find yourself struggling with the course or some aspect of it, come and see me before it gets too stressful or too late to remedy.*

## **Assignments and grading**

Your course grade will be calculated according to the following breakdown:

- Participation 15%
- Critical reading responses (posted to Moodle) 20%
- Discussion leadership assignment 15%
- Informal, reflective response papers (4) 20%
- Research paper (in stages) 30%

Participation Your success in the course (as well as the overall success of the course) will depend upon your active and sustained engagement. I expect everyone to participate at a high level; however, we all don't have the same aptitudes and learning styles, so you should think about participation flexibly. While it includes asking questions and participating in discussions, it also includes *active* listening, having your text open (and reading along), annotating and notetaking, and participation in small-group work.

Active participation also involves making comments that show how you have substantially engaged with the text on your own time, and are making connections between different texts and themes that we've covered, as well as connections to other courses or everyday life.

Critical reading responses You will be responsible for posting a critical reading response and question to the appropriate discussion board on Moodle before each class.

Discussion leadership assignment Together with a couple of other classmates, you will have the opportunity to lead the class discussion on a day and topic of your choosing.

Reflective reading response papers These short papers (~500 words, double spaced) will allow you to reflectively discuss the readings and discussion from a particular week of class. You will turn in four papers over the course of the first eight weeks of the term. These papers are due on Mondays, following the week whose readings you are discussing. Only one paper may be turned in each week, and *at least two must be turned in by Week 5*.

Final paper In the final paper, you will explore a topic which you will develop in consultation with me. The paper will develop in stages.

## **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

Carleton College is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodations should contact the Coordinator of Disability Services, Andy Christensen, at 222-4464 or anchrist@carleton.edu, to begin the process. Carleton faculty are strongly encouraged to wait for official notification of accommodations before modifying course requirements for students.

## **Academic support**

Carleton has a wealth of resources for students who want to improve their academic skills. Take advantage of them!

### Library research

Ask a librarian for help with your research in this class. You can drop by the library's Research/IT desk to ask any question you have, at any point in your process. Librarians help students find and evaluate articles, books, websites, statistics, data, government documents, and more. For more information on hours and librarians, visit the library's website: <http://go.carleton.edu/library>.

### Public Speaking and Class Presentations

The Speakeasy is a student-staffed resource designed to assist you with class presentations, comps talks, and other speech-related events. Groups and individuals are welcome at our location in the Libe (room 314). A Speakeasy coach, Chad Stevenson or Diana Fraser, can also meet you at other mutually convenient times. Just email them at [stevensonc@carleton.edu](mailto:stevensonc@carleton.edu) or [fraserd@carleton.edu](mailto:fraserd@carleton.edu). For days and times when the Speakeasy is open, visit [go.carleton.edu/speakeasy](http://go.carleton.edu/speakeasy).

### Time Management, Study Skills, and Test-Prep Strategies

Chavonna Savage ([csavage@carleton.edu](mailto:csavage@carleton.edu)), a Hall Director who also works in the Academic Support Center, can work with you to improve your time management and academic skills. Her goals are to heighten your awareness of your personal strengths and skills, and to offer different ways you can approach your academic work so you're more efficient and effective. Chavonna meets students during her regular drop-in office hours, which are listed on the Academic Skills Coaching website. You can also email her to set up a meeting outside her office hours.

### The Writing Center

The Writing Center, located on 4th Libe, has peer writing consultants who can work with you during any stage of the writing process (brainstorming to final proofreading). Hours are listed here: <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/asc/writingcenter/>. You can reserve specific times for conferences by using their online appointment system: <https://writingcenter.carleton.edu/>. Walk-ins are welcome, though writers

with appointments have priority.

### Writing Assistance for Students Whose First Language Is Not English

If you are a second language writer and believe you might benefit from working individually with a writing consultant on a regular basis this term, email Renata Fitzpatrick, Second-Language Writing Coordinator, call her at x5998, or stop by her office in 420D 4th Libe. She can arrange once- or twice-a-week meetings between you and a specific writing consultant throughout the term.

## Course outline

### **Week one Introduction to the course and Marx's critique of political economy**

- Mar 28 Welcome and introductions
- Mar 30 Albert Hirschman. 1982. "Rival Views of Market Society: Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble?" *Journal of Economic Literature*, 20: 1463-84.  
Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour" in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.
- Apr 1 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 1: "The Commodity" (pp. 125-163)  
Heinrich, *Introduction*, Chapters 1-2 (pp. 13-38)

### **Week two Marx on money, labor, value**

- Apr 4 Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 1: "The Commodity" (pp. 163-177)  
Heinrich, *Introduction*, Chapter 3 (pp. 39-80)
- Apr 6 Marx, *Capital*, Part 2: "The Transformation of Money into Capital" (pp. 247-280)  
Heinrich, *Introduction*, Chapter 4 (pp. 81-98)
- Apr 8 Heinrich, *Introduction*, Chapters 5-6 (pp. 99-140)

### **Week three Dynamics of capital**

- Apr 11 Marx, On Primitive Accumulation  
David Harvey, "Accumulation by Dispossession"
- Apr 13 Kalyan Salyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, selections TBA
- Apr 15 Duncan Foley, "Socialism" in *Understanding Capitalism* (pp. 158-170)  
Eric Olin Wright, "The Socialist Compass" in *Envisioning Real Utopias* (pp. 110-149)

### **Week four Ideology and cultural Marxism**

- Apr 18 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (excerpts)  
Georg Lukács, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* (excerpts)
- Apr 20 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (excerpts)  
Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
- Apr 22 Stuart Hall, excerpts

**Week five**      **Contemporary capitalism and critiques**

Apr 25          Readings TBA

Apr 27          Readings TBA

Apr 29          Readings TBA

**Week six**      **The origins of neoliberalism**

May 2          **Midterm break – no class**

May 4          Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Chapters TBA

May 6          Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Chapters TBA

**Week seven**    **Neoliberalism and biopolitics**

May 9          Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Chapters TBA

May 11         Roberto Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics”

May 13         Guest: Greg Bird on Biopolitics and Guest-workers

**Week eight**    **Neoliberal capitalism and race**

May 16         Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-55)

May 18         Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, Chapters 2-3 (pp. 57-110)

May 20         Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, Chapters 5-6 (pp. 139-196)

**Week nine:**    **New subjectivities?**

May 23         Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Introduction and Chapter 2 (pp. xix-xxvii; 23-52)

May 25         Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Chapters TBA

May 27         Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Chapters TBA

**Week ten:**     **Thinking about alternatives**

May 30         TBA

Jun 1          TBA