A Political Economy of Class: Contemporary Debates and Challenges

Fridays, 11:35 - 2:25
Location: Room 234 Paterson Hall

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Office Hours: Fridays 2:30-3:30 or by appointment

Introduction

Class and class politics are two of political economy’s central concepts but there is has been little agreement about how they are best understood or mobilised. In the current period, political economy’s analyses of class and class politics have been seriously challenged in two different ways. The global power of neoliberalism fosters claims that class and class struggle are no longer relevant. Despite growing wealth inequality, in public discussions class is typically ignored, denied, or collapsed into a notion of a global “middle class”? At the same time, mobilisations of indigenous, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and feminist movements, especially in the global south, have insisted that traditional ideas of class and class politics must be rethought. The central questions of the course are how political economy has responded to such challenges and what understandings of class and class politics are most relevant in today’s situation.

The course also focuses on ways to improve students’ understanding of and comfort with theory. One goal is to improve our ability to identify the theories informing the material we read, to increase our understanding of how theory shapes knowledge production, how the socio-political context shapes theory, and to be more explicit about the theories that shape our own work. The course also deals explicitly with issues related to critical thinking, political engagement and contemplative thought. It encourages students to develop their academic skills, particularly critical reading, research, writing, and presentations.

Students have an opportunity to:

1. become familiar with some of the ways in which political economy has theorised class, with particular attention to the significant contributions of Canadian political economy and selected movements from the global south;

2 investigate how political economy understands the relationships among class, gender and race;

3. develop critiques of current representations of class and class-based movements;

4. explore the possibilities of interdisciplinary scholarship that integrates social sciences, natural sciences and the humanities;
5. learn about what theory is, and to become more comfortable doing theory;
6. improve their academic skills of critical reading, research, writing, and presentations.

**Weekly Schedule and Required Readings**

Note: The main required reading book has been ordered through Octopus Books: Nixon, Rob *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 2011. Other readings are available from the library and on line.

**9 Jan Introduction:**

*Introductions:* Who are we? What do we bring to the course? What do we want from the course? What does “political economy” mean to each of us? What does “class” mean?

*Course administrivia:* review of the course outline; access to readings;

*Academic skills:* creating safe classrooms for learning: what makes a class safe or unsafe, effective or not for each of us?

**16 Jan  Political Economy and Class:**


**23 Jan Coming to terms with “Class”:**

Williams, Raymond “Class” *Keywords A vocabulary of culture and society* London: Fontana Press, 1983:60-69

Acker, Joan “Thinking about Gendered and Racialized Class” chapter 3 Class Questions Feminist Answers New York: Rowman and Littlefield 2006: 45-75


30 Jan From Feudalism to Capitalism and the Development of Political Economy:

view all of film THE HISTORY BOOK (produced by Li Vilstrup and Jannik Hastrup; distributed by Tricontinental Film center (about 1.5 hours in total):

1 A Flickering Light in the Darkness (1972) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDEWp9XQBJI

2 A Dawn: Overcoming all Difficulties (1972) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJgvbpMF5qk

3 A Bright Future .... for Some (1972) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGF6Kz2hKeg

4 Bloody Schemes (1972) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N00Hnn2C3Q

5 Triumphant Symphony (1974) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP6sOytvCYk


Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels The Communist Manifesto 1848 any edition

6 Feb Class in the Early 21st Century: The Challenge of Visibility:

Carroll, William “Whither the Transnational Capitalist Class?” in Panitch, Leo, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber (eds) Registering Class Socialist Register 2014:162-188

http://www.jstor.org/stable/647172

**13 Feb Class Struggle in the Early 21st Century: Corporations, Governments and Distributive Justice:**


Note: The abstract identifying the research question and the methodology proposed to conduct the research; and an annotated bibliography of 5 items (not included in the required readings for the course) is due in class: 27 Feb 2015

**20 Feb  Winter Break – No Class**

**27 Feb A Political Economy of Class: Scholars, Research and Writer-Activists:**


**6 Mar Resistance, Activism, Envisioning Alternatives:**


Note: March 8 is International Women’s Day (IWD). Try to attend some of the activities marking IWD in your community. What are the issues?
13 Mar TBA

20 Mar  Conference

Note: Students are expected to attend and participate in the all-day Conference on 20 March 2015: "More than Getting By: Putting Daily Life at the Heart of our Struggles".

27 Mar Note: The last class or last two classes will be a Mock Congress at which students present their final papers. The format and date will be determined in class depending on the number of people in the class on either Mar 27 or Apr 8 or both

3 Apr Statutory Holiday – No Class

Wednesday 8 Apr  Last Class  Mock Congress

Grades and Assignments:

1. Critical Reading Reviews: due: one day before the class; worth: 10% each for a total of 30%*

For any three classes (excluding the class for which you are doing a seminar presentation), prepare a critical review that weaves together all the readings for the week to show how the readings contribute to an analysis of the topic. What are the main theses or arguments, to what extent are they similar, in what ways do they differ from, or disagree with each other? what are their central concepts and what supporting evidence and/or arguments are developed? Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. Show how the readings relate to other material covered in the course. Note: be careful to present a critique, not a summary.

At least one day before the class, send your review by email to everyone in the class. Your paper will be graded and returned in the next class.

At least two of the reviews must be submitted before Reading Week (20 February 2015)

*One of the main goals of the course is to help students improve their writing. The three weekly reading assignments will be marked out of ten. This grading system does not allow for significant differentiation so each paper will be given letter grades. If anyone gets less than a B+ once the final grade is calculated, they can choose to have the reading assignments calculated out of 25 (instead of 30) and have the additional 5% added to the final paper. Students who choose this option must indicate their choice on the final paper when they hand it in.

2. Seminar Presentation  worth: 10 %

Each student will lead the seminar discussion for one week. On the Tuesday preceding the class (at the latest), the presenter will circulate a question or questions which will be the focus of the class discussion. The seminar leader will begin the class discussion by presenting a critique of the readings (not a summary) that includes a discussion of the following questions: what is the
main theoretical framework shaping the text(s), what are the key concepts employed? how coherent is the argument? what kinds of analysis does it require? invite or preclude?
Note: Depending on the size of the class, two or more students may present in any one seminar. The total time available for presentations is 20 minutes.

3. Participation: A substantial portion of the grade is allocated to participation because a lot of learning occurs in class time; a class develops continuity, a sense of community and a collective consciousness through the experience of meeting together. The participation grade is not based on the number of times a student speaks, but reflects an assessment of their overall preparation, informed contribution to class discussions (i.e. evidence of having done the readings and of having thought about them before class), and responsiveness to the presentations and comments of other students. This grade recognises work that is not specifically graded, and offers a way to appreciate those students who make a special contribution to building the class as a community. 10%

4. Final Paper: In consultation with the course director students identify a research question relating to political economy and class and produce a final paper. Worth: 50% divided as follows:
   i. abstract: submit an abstract identifying the research question and the methodology proposed to conduct the research; and an annotated bibliography of 5 items (not included in the required readings for the course): due: 27 Feb 2015; worth: 10%

   ii. conference presentation: present the research to date in the end of term mock Congress 10%

   iii. final paper: submit a journal length paper. due: 8 April 2015; worth: 30%

Expectations and Responsibilities

At the start of the course and throughout the term we will discuss how our class can best facilitate our learning. As a starting point, there are certain professional and collegial practices that are essential for a safe and effective learning environment. The course involves a two hour and fifty minute class each week. Students must attend classes, be in class on time and stay for the duration of the class. Students will come to class with copies of, and notes on the week’s readings and be prepared to contribute to class discussions. This course is conducted as a seminar so students and faculty will take turns leading the class discussion by summarizing the main themes of the readings and providing discussion questions. Each class includes some or all of: group discussion of the readings, small group activities, student presentations, a lecture or equivalent by the course director. On a regular basis students talk about the research they are doing for their final paper. Use of computer technologies (laptops, netbooks, smart phones) in the classroom is encouraged if it augments academic learning related to this course. Students are expected to ensure they do not receive or send personal messages during class time.

Note: The production of recordings of classroom interactions is expressly prohibited unless authorized and approved by the instructor and by all class participants. The use of such
recordings is subject to guidelines for ethical professional use. Unauthorized web posting of such recordings constitutes a serious violation of members’ privacy and confidentiality rights. Unless given permission by the Department or the instructors, students are not authorized to speak on behalf of the department. Moreover, students should not give the impression that they can speak on behalf of the department. Students must not share information that is explicitly confidential about the department or confidential information about their professors or other students.

**Useful Academic Dates**

16 January Last day for registration for winter term courses

31 January Last day for withdrawal from winter term courses with full fee adjustment.

16 February Statutory holiday. University closed.

16-20 February Winter Break, no classes.

1 March Last day for receipt of applications from potential spring (June) graduands.

3 April Statutory holiday. University closed.

8 April Winter term ends. Classes follow a Friday schedule. Last day for academic withdrawal winter term courses.
Material not yet integrated:

- **Who's Who On-line**
  Review biographical entries on "Who's Who On-line." What status characteristics do these people have?

- **United Nations Economic and Social Development**
  A review of international data on social and economic development.

- **The Canadian Council on Social Development**
  Statistical information on family income, poverty, welfare incomes, the number of people on welfare, and related topics.

- **Homeless People's Network by thread**
  A collection of archived e-mail correspondence that discusses poverty, homelessness, and related issues.

- **Literacy and Homelessness Project**
  Written for people who do or would like to do literacy and community development work with people who are transient or homeless.

- **The National Anti-Poverty Organization**
  A non-governmental, non-partisan advocacy organization which represents the interests of low-income Canadians. Discusses the sources of poverty and possible ideas for action.

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Social Relations, Social Location

Identity/Consciousness

Visions and Activism/acquiescence

Clement, Wallace “Introduction: Whither the New Canadian Political Economy?” chapter 1


Paul Treanor: [http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/neoliberalism.html](http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/neoliberalism.html)


George Dei 2012 “Revisiting The Intersection of Race, Class, Gender in the Anti-Racism Discourse”. In. Valerie Zawilski (ed.). *Inequality in Canada: A Reader on the Intersections of Gender, Race and Class*. London: Oxford University Press. 2nd edition

