Course Description:
This course situates Marx’s critique of political economy within his Epicurian materialism, ecological naturalism, praxis-oriented humanism, and his revolutionary politics. By exploring the complex relationship between these strands of his work, the course will assess various contending interpretations of Marx’s work as a whole.

Course Objectives:
This course aims (1) to familiarize you with Marx firsthand by getting you to read some of his most fundamental writings, (2) to immerse you in debates about the overall shape and significance of his work, including how its various strands interrelate and (3), to discuss the ongoing afterlife of Marx’s writings. We will pursue these overlapping goals more or less simultaneously as different levels of discussion as we make our way through his work. By reading this complex and prolific thinker first hand, we will build up a nuanced and critical understanding of his work that will challenge its glib and distorted summaries at the hands of both detractors and supporters.

The course necessarily gives central attention to Marx’ critique of political economy and the common misconception that he was an economic determinist. We will seek more accurate understandings of Marx’ relation to political economy, the ways in which he wrote both inside and outside of that tradition. His own theoretical position was clearly more complex, and combined a materialist, naturalist and even ecological outlook that situates social life in the natural world without fixing it; a humanist outlook grounded in praxis that treats human collectivities as constructed in how they construct their world; and an anthropological commitment to recognizing the variation that results. Marx’ politics rested on this open-ended but historically grounded basis. By examining his political and journalistic writing, we will evaluate whether, as many have claimed, he truly was soft on colonialism, ignored questions of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality or subordinated them to class. We will also examine why his discussions of socialism and communism are so schematic, and their complex relation to anarchism.