Space, Place and Capitalism: Themes in Historical-Geographical Materialism

York University, Fall 2017

(GEOG 5375; ENVS5475, SOCI6794)

Instructor: Raju J Das

Class Time: Tuesday: 11:30-2:30
Class Location: Ross South 536

Office hours: Tues: 2.30-3.30; Wed: 2.30-3.30
Office Location: Ross South 411

‘[Capital is] without question the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)’ (Karl Marx, 1867)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The course is a basic introduction to some of the key ideas in Marxist Theory. Standing on three intellectual foundations (dialectical-materialist philosophy, historical-materialist social theory, and political economy), Marxist theory is an organic whole. It reflects the totality it studies, and which it seeks to shape. That totality is the class-society, and more specifically, the capitalist class society, which has now become a truly global system making Marx more relevant than ever. So:

‘[T]his historical moment, the one we’re living in now, is the best not the worst, the most not the least appropriate moment to bring back Marx… Marx is more relevant than ever, because he, more effectively than any other human being then or now, devoted his life to explaining the systemic logic of capitalism’. (Ellen Wood in Monthly Review, 1997)

The dominant focus of the course is on political economy as laid out in Capital 1. We will read Capital 1 in the spirit in which its author had written it: to primarily promote a scientific and critical understanding of capitalism, in terms of its conditions, mechanisms and effects.

Reading this text will not be an exercise in philosophy, although a careful reading of this and related texts will reveal numerous philosophical assumptions, which will be discussed in week 1 to prepare us for the class discussions. The Seminar will treat Capital 1 basically as a scientific text. It is a difficult text, one that demands hard scientific labour. As Marx himself acknowledged: ‘There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits’ (Marx’s 1872 Preface to the French edition of Capital 1).

There is a (contradiction-ridden) world that is, more or less, independent of the (philosophical, etc.) ways in which we understand it. Its inner mechanisms and their concrete effects on our lives urgently cry out for a scientific explanation and a critique. Such an intellectual endeavor is

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1 Information about the Instructor: http://people.laps.yorku.ca/people.nsf/researcherprofile?readform&shortname=rajudas
necessary for the struggle to transcend this world, which is marked by crass commercialization, deepening economic-spatial inequalities, intense exploitation of labour, alienation, unceasing imperialistic oppression, and irreversible environmental damage.

The distinctive characteristics of the seminar/course include the following:

1. *The emphasis on production*: The focus is on production of the capitalist form of wealth, and its social relations of production, *as they are discussed in Capital 1* (although selective insights from other texts of Marx will be referred to), while attention will be paid to the other two elements of the whole of which production is the key part: dispossessio and class-differentiation.

2. *Class Perspective*: Our discussions will focus on political economy from the standpoint of class theory: topics will be explored from the standpoint of capitalists’ and workers’ interests. Given the importance of the state in sustaining capitalist power, it is also an important topic.

3. *Global character of capitalism*: Capitalism will be treated as a global system (‘world economy’), which, as a distinct unit of analysis, is not merely the sum of national parts, and as a system that is marked by imperialism. Empirical materials from the Global South, from the Global North, and from the world economy, will be used to illustrate the theoretical arguments. We will discuss the similarities and differences between the capitalism of Marx’s times and contemporary capitalism.

4. *Full spectrum Marxism*: Marx is not equal to Marxism. The seminar is in the tradition of the Marxism of Marx-Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky (‘MELLT’) and their genuine intellectual legacy (these names represent intellectual tendencies rather than persons who are above criticism).

5. *Space, and uneven development, and nature*: Marx’s political economy was more or less an aspatial agenda, and did not always make explicit capitalism’s ecological aspects. Marxism after Marx has also been largely aspatial, although useful spatial insights have been produced by MELLT figures such as Lenin (on imperialism), Luxemburg (‘non-capitalist spaces’), and Trotsky (uneven and combined development). Therefore, a geographical reading of Marx and later Marxists is necessary: there is a need for a special form of historical materialism, i.e. historical-geographical materialism, as Harvey calls it. The literature that deals with space, place, scale and environment (especially, Harvey’s work) will be employed. Similarly, we will discuss Marxist views on nature.

6. *Post-Marx literature*: Marxism is neither equal to Marx nor to MELLT. We discuss not only Marx’s and other classical Marxists’ texts but also texts written by contemporary Marxists drawn from different parts of the world and from different disciplinary backgrounds.

7. *Marxist philosophy*: The discussion is informed by ideas from Anglo-American Marxist philosophy (mainly Dialectics, but also critical realism).

The course has two parts. Part 1 deals with some of the main themes of Marx’s *Capital vol. 1*.

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2The MELLT tradition is self-consciously dialectical-materialist and thoroughly internationalist. It is critical of the class-exploitation and social oppression (expressed as an attack on the democratic rights of oppressed groups such as low-income women and racialized/ethnic minorities). It is critical of the various ways of understanding the world and changing it such as: free-market economics, liberalism, ‘identity politics’, social-democracy, economic trade-unionism, nationalism, statism (developmental statism), and Stalinism (Stalinist or ‘mainstream’ Marxism).
represented in the diagram below). These concepts will be spatialized and refined, where necessary, through a reading of the post-Marx literature.

These topics raise numerous foundational questions about life and society.3

In Part 2, we will discuss the concepts that Marx did not deal with explicitly or in much detail in *Capital Vol 1* (or indeed elsewhere). These topics are:

The course has the following major *specific* learning outcomes:

1. To learn Marx’s views on some of the essential aspects of capitalism and to see capitalism as a material-dialectical relation-process with its progressive and problematic features;
2. To explore spatial and ecological implications of concepts in Marxist thought;
3. To reflect on Marx’s views in relation to other writers since Marx, including those influenced by post-structuralism*and* feminist and anti-racist thought;
4. To understand capitalism as a *global* system and to familiarize oneself with Marxist ideas of

3 For example: why are most of us treated like things?; how do people lose control over the conditions of their lives and become commodity-like?; why does buying and selling (to make more money) appear to be our natural instinct?; how is our language to describe the world changing according to the dynamics of market relations?; what happens when people have nothing but the power of their body and mind to sell?; why do we have to work under someone-else’s control in her/his private interest?; why do we have to make someone else rich as a way of satisfying our very basic needs?; why has work become uninteresting and alienating?; how do we and our planet impacted by rapid technological changes and large-scale industrialization controlled by the profit-motive?; why do millions live in poverty when there is so much wealth in the world and when a few people and a few areas bask in an unimaginable level of affluence?; why do we have to waste our productive energy in fighting for every little thing we need?; why is it that society devalues and de-prioritizes the things that we need (e.g. education, healthcare, art) but that generate no profit?, and so on.
scholars from (and/or working on) both more developed and less developed countries, and thus to learn to view Marxist political economy as a ‘global’ discourse with multiple spatial origins and to engage in a non-Eurocentric reading of these ideas; and

5. To recognize that the economic/material has a political and discursive dimension, although the economic cannot be collapsed into either of these, and has a certain degree of primacy.

The course has several general learning outcomes as well. These include:

1. To appreciate the nature of geographical imagination that bridges and intellectually synthesizes the study of human and natural environments;
2. To analyze events, phenomena and processes in relation to their socio-spatial contexts and human-nature dynamics;
3. To comprehend the roles played by social relations of domination and resistance in the production and reproduction of places, spaces, and landscapes;
4. To use critical perspectives, research tools, information sources, and analytical techniques to comprehensively approach an original research problem;
5. To contextualize original research within the current scholarly literature and justify its contribution to the production of knowledge;
6. To develop/support a sustained argument about original research in writing and verbally;
7. To clearly and concisely summarize, evaluate, synthesize and critique scholarly literature from diverse theoretical perspectives;
8. To apply concepts to think independently, creatively and analytically.

WHAT THE COURSE IS NOT AND WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN IT?

‘If we think in terms of the academic categories we are used to today, then Marx’s Capital appears to be more an historical and sociological, rather than an economic theory’ (Karl Korsch)

So, this is not a course in economics as it is taught in economics department, nor is it a course on the history of economic ideas. The course avoids technical discussions on economic matters.

It is a course on Marxism, with the focus on Marxist political economy, that is, the discourse on the dialectical connection between the economic, including production/accumulation of wealth and the conflictual relations of production and exchange, and the political (including the state and struggle over production and inequalities). An advanced (=college level) knowledge of economics or mathematics is not necessary. One also does not need formal training in Geography or Environmental studies or Sociology, etc.to benefit from this course. Everyone with an interest in understanding the capitalist system and the way in which it affects us (in positive and adverse ways) may benefit from the course.One has to be a little open-minded about learning an alternative (and often counter-intuitive) way of understanding our world!

As far as Geography students at York are concerned, this course, a key component of the suite of critical human geography courses, will be an important foundational course for economic, cultural and political geographers and political-ecologists who need to know about Marxists’ contribution to the understanding of place, space, scale and environment.

Given that the course aims to provide an understanding of basic political-economic ideas on imperialism, the global periphery, ecological issues, etc., it will also be useful for the growing numbers of students at York and other Toronto-based universities interested in development and
environment issues who are in Geography as well as Environmental Studies, Development or International/Area Studies programs.

This course will help students in Geography and in allied disciplines (e.g. sociology, political science, anthropology, etc.), who wish to develop what Marxist geographer, David Harvey calls ‘geographical imagination’, to be able to argue their own theoretical positions with non-geographers better, whether they want to be historical-geographical materialists or postmodern urban landscape analysts or neo-classical location Specialists.

If you would like to sharpen your conceptual tools against Marx and Marxism, this course may also be for you! A critic must know her enemy well!

You can sample the Marxist discourse in these journals which supply a part of the reading material for the course: *Capital and Class, Science and Society, New Left Review, Monthly Review, Review of Radical Political Economics, Historical Materialism, Socialist Register, Human Geography: A New Radical Journal*, and (to some extent) *Antipode*. There are also several online sites, including www.wsws.org, www.socialistproject.ca, www.radicalnotes.com, https://www.jacobinmag.com/, and www.links.org.au. [There is no implication that all these online sites are ‘equally Marxist’!]

**READINGS:**
2. We will read a few articles and/or book chapters every week, including from this book: Das, R. 2017. *Marxist class theory for a skeptical world*, Brill: Leiden (available online at York University: http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/content/books/9789004337473).

We will also read some material from my *Marx, Capital and Contemporary Capitalism: A Global Perspective*, Taylor and Francis, London (to be published in 2018). These readings will be made available to you at the course moodle site (please register) or through the university library system. You do not have to enter into the market-place to access the readings!

Strongly supplementing the class is the Marxist reading group meetings throughout the year which my graduate students and I organize in Geography. At these meetings we discuss key Marxist readings. I strongly advise that you consider attending at least some of these meetings. The dates and topics for discussion will be available in the class.

**ASSESSMENT AND COURSE ORGANIZATION RULES:**

Rules for a harmonious and productive functioning of a system that satisfies the needs of all are important to adhere to. The seminar is such a system and it has certain rules/requirements. Students will be evaluated on the basis of the following requirements (members of the seminar may make suggestions for some changes in these through a democratic discussion in the first meeting).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Mark Breakdown</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class participation, weekly reflection papers, and ‘a summary of summaries’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay 1 (‘The Marx essay’)</td>
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<td>Essay 2 (The ‘post-Marx’ essay)</td>
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a) Class participation and weekly reflections papers (10% + 20% = 30%):

Students must actively participate in the weekly class-discussions. They will be expected to discuss the readings every week, ask and answer questions. Each participant is expected to have enough material with her/him to speak for about 5 minutes every week.

Each student is expected to bring to the beginning of the class a typed (double-spaced) reflection paper (length: 400 words for weeks 1-7, and 800 words for weeks 8-12). These papers will provide a summary of the main points from the set of weekly readings, and include a few questions and critical comments on them. A given number of papers per student will be randomly selected for assessment. A missing paper carries minus 2% (out of 20%). An email submission is not accepted.

b) Essay 1 (‘the Marx essay’): (40% of the grade): You will be provided a number of concepts from Marx around which you will write a 4000-word essay. In this essay you are expected to:

   a) provide Marx’s definition of each concept and point out the essential aspects of each concept (following a format like this: what is x, what is x caused/conditioned/governed by and what x tends to be responsible for or lead to?);
   b) elaborate at least a few of these essential aspects, including by providing quotes from Marx (You must cite the Marx readings supplied to you, and not from other sources),
   c) present brief comments on Marx, in the light of the weekly non-Marx Marxist readings;
   d) discuss the ways in which the concepts are inter-connected to produce a ‘discursive whole’ reflecting the capitalist system;
   e) provide your 4-line own summary of Capital volume I that captures its essence;
   f) attach an appendix of 15 questions which you would ask workers, in an interview, to find out about their views on how capitalism works and how they experience capitalism. These questions must be derived from Capital I and connected to the concepts you discuss. Each question will carry a reference to a specific page/paragraph of your essay.

You may imagine that you are doing a dictionary of key Capital vol I concepts for an educated intelligent audience (e.g. advanced sections of the class conscious working class eager to understand Marx). If you write a few paragraphs every week about the concepts as we discuss them over the first five weeks, these can form the raw material for your short essay. The Marx essay (a hardcopy) is due on November 9. There is a lateness penalty (5%/week).

c) Essay 2 (the ‘post-Marx’ essay): (30% of the grade): Students will show that in order to adequately understand the topic of their choice, one must have a thorough knowledge of Marx’s and Marxist ideas (i.e. historical materialist ideas which are broadly rooted in and/or consistent with Marx’s approach to capitalism in Capital vol I). The essay requirements are the following:

   a. The topic of the essay must be from the weekly list of topics from the second part of the course (weeks 8-12);
   b. You will critically review 10 articles/chapters of standard length (at least 6000 words) including at least 8 from the further reading list on your chosen topic (to be supplied);
   c. Your review of the topic will identify and discuss 3-4 aspects of the topic;
   d. You must make your own intellectual stance on the literature clearly by answering the question, ‘what do you make of the literature?’.

You must draw intellectual (and political
conclusions, where possible), of your review;

e. An excellent essay would relate the discussion to ideas of Marx in *Capital vol 1*(topics discussed in the first part of the course) and connect to an aspect of the current conjuncture;

f. From the standpoint of equity, the paper will be 5000 words for Ph.D. students and 4000 words for Master’s students;

g. The essay (hardcopy) is due on **December 13, 2017**. There is a **lateness** penalty (5%/week).

*I suggest that before you write the essay, you consult, on the topic of critique, the one-page philosophy litmus test (to be supplied) and this article: https://radicalnotes.com/2012/12/25/thinkingwriting-theoretically-about-society/ For more details on the topic of critique: see Das. R. 2014. *A Contribution to the Critique of Contemporary Capitalism*, chapter one (e-copy of the book is available at York).

The York library system has excellent research resources, including:

(1) Geography Research Guide [http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/geography](http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/geography) . This provides information on how to search for journal articles, newspaper articles, books and other resources in the discipline of Geography.

(2) Economics Research Guide [http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/economics](http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/economics) . This provides information on how to search for journal articles, newspaper articles, books and other resources in the discipline of Economics.

**GRADING SCHEME**

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>&gt; 90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>85-89.9</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>80-84.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>75-79.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>70-74.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>60-69.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>&lt;60%</td>
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**WEEKLY TOPICS AND REQUIRED READINGS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Introduction to the Course; Discussion on Marxist Philosophy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1: Sept. 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marx, K., &amp; Engels, F. and Trotsky, L. On philosophy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Das. 2017. ‘Philosophical Foundations…’ in <em>Marxist Class Theory</em> (Chapter 5)</td>
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<tr>
<th>II. (Spaces of) Commodity, Commodification, and Commodity Fetishism</th>
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<td>Week 2: Sept. 19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marx, K. <em>Capital Vol 1</em>: Chapter 1 (‘The Commodity’).</td>
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| III. History and Geography of (Re)Commodification and (on-going) Primitive Accumulation |

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| Week 3: Sept 26 | Marx, K. *Capital* vol 1. Chapters on ‘So-called primitive accumulation’.  
| | V. Twin Forms of Exploitation (1): Prolongation of the Working day (and ‘lowering wages’) | Week 5: Oct 10 | Marx, K. *Capital* volume 1: Chapter 10. And: Chs. 19-21  
Cleaver, H. 1977. *Reading capital politically*, pp. 77-80 |
| | | | [{link to text}](#) |
Harvey, D. 2014. ‘Technology, work and human disposability’, in his *Seventeen Contradictions*, pp. 91-111  
Tinker, T. 2002. ‘Spectres of Marx and Braverman in the twilight of postmodernist labour process research’, *Work, employment and society*, 16(2), pp. 251-281. |
| | | | [{link to text}](#) |
| | | | [{link to text}](#) |
Harvey, D. 2010. ‘Uneven geographical developments and the production of space’, in his *Seventeen Contradictions*.  
Trotsky, L. ‘Uneven and Combined development’. |
| | IX. Spatiality of Capitalism: Imperialism and The ‘Hidden Abode’ of Peripheral Capitalism | | |
### Week 9: Nov. 7
- Lenin, V. 1939. *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism* (chs 7-8).
- Das, R. 2017. ‘Subsumptions of labour by capital: The theory of capitalist class relation from an international perspective’, in *Marxist Class theory* ... (chapter 8).

### Week 10: Nov. 14
**X. Class (Struggle), Race and Gender**
- Fields, B. 1990. ‘Slavery, race and ideology in the United States of America’, *New LeftReview* No. 181, pp. 95-118

### Week 11: Nov. 21
**XI. The State, and Relations of Class, Capitalism and Space**
- Lenin. On *The state* (provides a good summary of Marx’s and Engels’ views)
- Das, R. 2017. ‘The capitalist state as constitutive of capitalist class relation’ in *Marxist class theory* (chapter 9).
- Poulantzas, N. 2008. ‘The capitalist state’ from *The Poulantzas Reader*, pp. 270-294
- Alavi, H. 1989. ‘The state and class under peripheral capitalism’

### Week 12: Nov 28
**XII. Environment/Nature, the Body, and Capitalism; Summary/Conclusion of Class-Discussions**
- Harvey, D. 2000. ‘The body as an accumulation strategy’ in his *Spaces of Hope*, University of California press, pp. 101-116