

Sample Syllabi – Subject to Change

SOSC 25132 94 - The Politics and Economics of Capitalism

Course Description:

It is impossible to graduate from college without repeatedly encountering the term “capitalism.” But what is it, actually? Is it primarily a political or an economic system? What is the difference and why does it matter? How has capitalism functioned historically and what kind of theories, if any, do we need to understand those histories? Why are economics and politics taught in different departments at modern universities and why is a major in economics so popular?

This course has two major learning outcomes:

1. To help students understand that these questions have profound social and political significance for our contemporary life. They are not just academic or technical questions that only students of economics, politics, or the history of economic thought should care about. Rather, any individual who feels that “capitalism” has something to do with their dissatisfactions needs to grapple with these questions. Only then might we be able to do something to change or affect capitalism.
2. To equip students with the basic conceptual tools to think about capitalism both historically and theoretically, and to recognize the practical implications of theoretical differences. The aim is not to present one approach as the best or correct one, but rather to enable students to judge for themselves the political and economic commentary that they come across in their own lives.

Our readings will primarily involve selections from six of the most important theorists of modern economic life: Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Friedrich List, William Stanley Jevons, John Maynard Keynes, and Friedrich Hayek. We will supplement with a few additional articles that contextualize the readings and criticize some of our chosen authors. We will also watch films and episodes of TV shows to help with learning and to make it memorable.

The basic concepts and progression of concepts/authors will be as follows:

1. Adam Smith – selections from *The Wealth of Nations*. Focus on his concept of “commercial society” and its political implications. How he is different from other early modern “political” theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and why that matters. Ask whether he succeeded entirely in creating a new discipline of “economics” and whether his category of “value” has any relevance for economics today.
2. Karl Marx – selections from *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Focus on how he both extends and criticizes Smith. Key concepts – commodity, value, abstract labor, surplus value, capital, and transformation of the labor process. Ask whether Marx’s category of value is more coherent than Smith’s, and whether that can help us understand any contemporary

trends such as the importance of financialization and artificial intelligence. What are the questions Marx leaves us with?

3. Friedrich List – selections from his *The National System of Political Economy*. Focus on how he criticized Smith from a directly political perspective. Discuss the immense historical influence of his work on the economic development of Germany, the United States of America, India, and even Ireland.
4. William Stanley Jevons – selections from *The Theory of Political Economy*. Focus on his theories of utility and marginal utility and how that differed from the categories of value and surplus value in Smith and Marx. Emphasize that although Jevons's critique is primarily 'economic' it has direct political implications.
5. John Maynard Keynes – selections from *A General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. Focus on his theories of effective demand, the possibility of a shortfall in effective demand, his proposed solutions, and their economic and political implications. Discuss the effect of his theories on the idea of the 'welfare state' across the world and in the United States. Reflect on what his work implies about the relationship between politics and economics, and whether he has a coherent theory of capitalism as such.
6. Friedrich Hayek – selections from *A Road to Serfdom*. Focus on his critique of Keynes, which emphasized politics much more than when Jevons criticized his predecessors. Discuss his impact on post-World War II economic thinking and on libertarianism in the United States. Reflect on whether capitalism is primarily a promise or a problem or both.