

Philosophy 520  
Marx I: Materialism

Prof. Richard A. Lee, Jr.

Office Hours: Monday 4:00pm-5:00pm; Wednesday 4:30-6:00pm; and by appointment  
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## Introduction

It seems relatively obvious to almost everyone that Marx was a materialist. Marx referred to his work frequently as operating with a materialist method and he often countered Hegelian idealism with what he took to be its opposite: materialism. Yet as obvious as this fact is, what it means is more difficult to understand. Without giving much thought, one might say that materialism is a kind of ontological position that holds that what is, being, is matter. As President Bill Clinton once said, it depends on the meaning of “is!” Marx learned from Hegel that what is real is more expansive than what is actually existing as we normally confront it. One example with which we will struggle is exchange-value [*Tauschwert*]. Marx refers to this as a ghost-like objectivity [*gespänstige Gegenständlichkeit*] in order to indicate that it operates in the real world without itself being material. To ignore the reality of non-material, abstract entities is to rob oneself of the necessary means for understanding social reality. Therefore, materialism cannot be the position that only things made of matter exist. This leads to a second problem: the philosophical task, as Marx presents it, is to *understand*, i.e., to think. Therefore, materialism must recognize that the thinking of the real world is, at the same time, other than that world that it thinks.

In this course, we will try to come to grips with what Marx and some of his interpreters understood under the name “materialism.” We will begin with Marx himself, looking primarily at his descriptions of the method he comes to call “materialism,” as well as the way it operates in *Capital*. We will then turn to three interpreters, followers, and/or “fellow-travelers.” We will begin with Louis Althusser, whose reading of Marx accidentally launched a great deal of the conceptual bestiary of deconstruction and Foucauldian genealogy. We will then turn to Adorno’s reflections on the way in which metaphysics after Auschwitz has “materialism thrust upon it.” Finally, we will look at Benjamin’s thinking of materialism in relation to history and the messianic.

## Requirements

Each week, one or more participant will introduce the text under discussion that week. The main point of the presentation should be to begin our discussion. Therefore, a worked-out interpretation is by no means necessary. What we need are some of the key arguments, concepts, and, perhaps more so, problems and questions that the text presents. You should plan on 10-15 minutes presentation time (including my interruptions!). We will spend the first half of each seminar discussing the text at issue for that meeting. The presentation will constitute 33% of your final grade.

Each student is expected to attend each and every meeting of the seminar. You should be prepared to contribute to the discussion of the text. Well, not only should you be prepared, you are expected to actually contribute to the discussion. Your contributions will constitute 17% of the final grade.

Finally, each student will write a final paper somewhere in the neighborhood of 15-20 pages. You are by no means required to speak to all of the thinkers we are discussing and you are allowed, if not encouraged, to bring other thinkers into the conversation. In addition, you probably should check to see if others have written on your topic—an activity sometimes known as research. I'd be happy to talk with you extensively about even nascent thoughts you might have concerning your final project. The paper will be worth 50% of the final grade.

## Course Format

Each week, we will spend half our time in discussion of the text under consideration for that meeting. The other half of the time, I will present what I take to be some of the fundamental concepts, issues, and contributions of the text. Sometimes my remarks will not be directly related to the text under consideration but will, instead, give background or prepare future texts.

With the exception of Adorno's lecture course, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, the "Reflections on Metaphysics" section of *Negative Dialectics*, and Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," the latter two are available on the D2L site, all the other texts are legitimately and, as far as I know, legally available online. The website marxists.org is an invaluable resource. Check it out. If you have purchased the texts and wish to take advantage of the free resources, by all means return them to the bookstore.

I am committed to the participation of all students regardless of ability. Therefore, if you need me to do anything in order to ensure your participation, please let me know at your earliest opportunity.

## Schedule

Note: Wherever possible, I have tried to indicate the reading without reference to page numbers of a specific edition/translation. Otherwise, all page numbers refer to the texts available from the bookstore.

Date	Reading	Presenter(s)
Sept. 14	None: Introduction	None
Sept. 21	Marx: Introduction (on D2L), <i>Capital</i> Postface to the 2nd Edition, Ch. 1	
Sept. 28	Marx, <i>Capital</i> , Chs. 2-6	
Oct. 5	Marx, <i>Capital</i> , Part 7, ch. 24	
Oct. 12	Althusser, <i>Reading Capital</i> Part II, chs. 1-7	
Oct. 19	Althusser, <i>For Marx</i> , "Contradiction and Overdetermination"	
Oct. 26	"On the Materialist Dialectic"	
Nov. 2	Adorno, <i>Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems</i> , lectures 13-18	
Nov. 9	Adorno, "Reflection on Metaphysics"	
Nov. 16	Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (on D2L)	
Nov. 24		Final Paper Due