Introduction

Over the last six years, many political commentators have referred to Charles Dickens’ opening lines in *The Tale of Two Cities*, that this is the worse of times and the best of times. This is the worst of times because the United States (and the global economy) is still embedded in an economic crisis of sustained low growth and growing economic inequality. It is the worst of times because we face an environmental crisis that some activists claim might lead to the end of life forms if drastic measures are not taken now. It is the worst of times because one-half of humankind still lives on less than $2 a day and in the United States some twenty-five percent of the population lives just above, at, or below the official poverty line and about 17 per cent of those who seek full-time work are un or under-employed. Economic inequality in wealth and income within the United States and between rich and poor countries continues to increase. It is the worst of times because the United States is officially engaged in multiple wars and still embraces a globalist vision that it must be engaged militarily virtually everywhere. And it is the worst of times because organized workers and, socialist, peace, and environmental movements are deeply divided and weak.

It is the best of times because millions of people including youth, people of color, workers, environmentalists, and peace activists joined forces to elect the first African American president of the United States in 2008 and 2012. Along with this dramatic break with aspects of U.S. racism, Obama supporters were energized by prospects and visions of qualitative change in American policies and institutions. It is the best of times because all different kinds of people, many disappointed with Obama’s performance and the worsening economic condition, are mobilizing in new ways to bring about change like “the 60s,” or “the 30s.” Inspired by Arab Spring, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana, the Occupy Movements emerged and continue along new and different paths. There are movements around peace, economic justice, health care, the environment and many other critical issues. Moral Mondays, initiated in North Carolina, is spreading across the South and Midwest based on a model of “fusion politics.” And throughout 2014 there has been growing discontent among young
people, many Black and Brown, who are saying “enough” to the epidemic of police violence. Some liken the grassroots campaigns around the theme of “Black Lives Matter” to the civil rights movements of the 1960s. In general, while unity remains elusive, the grassroots is mobilizing.

Does our educational work reflect this contradictory political, economic, social, and cultural universe? Does it help us understand the depths of the crises people face economically and politically? Does it provide a systemic analysis which gives clarity to what needs to be changed? Does it provide examples of alternative forms of social organization to debate about?

While the answers to the questions raised above are “probably not” or “only partially,” this course will take on the project of trying to understand the worst of times and the possibilities embedded in grassroots and social movements to create a better world.

The course begins with presentations about competing economic views on how and why the world is the way it is and should be: from Smith to Marx, Veblen, to Hayek, and Keynes. It then will be followed by a discussion of the systemic causes of the current economic crisis and the “contradictions of capital.” After discussion and debate about approaches to political economy, highlighting and debating Marxist approaches, contemporary neoliberal globalization will be discussed. Then the class will explore the roles of class, race, and gender as conceptual tools for understanding the modern world and for changing it. Further, through multiple sources, the class will study the history of class struggle in America and contemporary movements for social change in the United States and around the world. Finally, we will look very briefly at various proposals for short and intermediate changes that could improve the human condition.

This course will be primarily a discussion course. Everyone is required to participate regularly in discussions of texts, videos, and the few “mini-talks” the instructor will give. If we all do not contribute to the seminar, it will be a bust, and the larger more important project beyond the classroom will have been less than successful.

In addition, each student will be asked to prepare mid-term and final essay examinations, and a ten page paper that reviews a text (described by the instructor) relating class to gender, race, or the environment. Exams and the paper should include extensive use of all the relevant in-class materials-readings, videos, student presentations—and any additional materials that students might consider relevant.
Finally, each student will be asked to initiate and lead discussion of a week’s reading. This should include very, very brief summaries of major themes in the week’s readings, presenters reactions to the readings (positive, negative, both), and questions for the class to discuss. Questions should be distributed one class period in advance so that the rest of us can begin to think about the issues being raised.

Final grades will be determined by four equal elements: class room participation (daily participation and the presentations), the mid-term, final exam, and the essay. More than five absences will lead to a one-half grade deduction from the final grade.

Books (available at Von’s Book Store)


Approximate Class Schedule

Theories of Political Economy: Marx and his Opponents

Week 1: Competing Approaches to Economic Theory: “Commanding Heights”; the video

Week 2: The Political Economy Approach: Sackrey ed. Chapter 1

Week 3: Smith, Marx, and Veblen: Sackrey ed. Chapter 2-4

Week 4: Keynes, Galbraith, and Social Class, Sackrey, ed. Chapter 5-7

Capitalism Today

Week 5: Baran and Sweezy, Sackrey ed. Chapter 8; Harvey Part 1

Week 6: Harvey, Part 2
Week 7: Harvey, Part 3, Targ on neo-liberal globalization (a small book which will be on Blackboard Learn)

**The Working Class Majority**

Week 8: Mid-term examination, Wysong, chapters 1-5

Week 9: Wysong chapters 6-9

Week 10: Wysong chapters 10-14

**Class Struggle in the United States**

Week 11: Dray, Chapters 1-4

Week 12: Dray Chapters 5-8

Week 13: Dray Chapters 9-10

Week 14: Dray Chapter 11,

**Today and the Future**

Week 15: Sackrey ed. Chapters 9-10 and readings provided on Blackboard Learn- papers due

**Among Possible Videos**

*Inside Job*

*The People Speak*

*From Wharf Rat to Lords of the Docks*

*The Corporation*

*The Take*

*Highlights from the Grohmann Collection*

*The Killing Floor*

*The Power of Song*

*Here I Stand*
Some relevant websites

Online University of the Left
Democracy Now
Common Dreams
Alternet
SolidarityEconomy.net
The Black Commentator
MR Zine
Diary of a Heartland Radical
The Rag Blog
Upside Down World
Inside Higher Education
Marxists Internet Archive