

IS303 Origins of Political Economy

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Office hours: Provided by individual seminar leaders

Course Description

This course explores the intellectual history of the contemporary disciplines of economics, political science and sociology, by examining the historical origins of the discourse and practice known as “political economy”: the means and processes by which societies and populations provide for their own survival and development. It offers an introduction to the reach and implications of this endeavor, its relationship to questions of law, sovereignty and political representation. It equally addresses changing state-market relationships and normative discourses about the best ways to organize societies as they echo in the liberal and critical traditions of Western political thought. In keeping with its attention to the formative history of modern categories and disciplines of knowledge, the course also addresses the ways in which changes in the (understanding of) political economy have led to disciplinary specializations and certain blind spots in analytically linking development and underdevelopment, enlightenment and exclusion. It allows students to understand, draw upon and critique the historical formulation of contemporary problems and concerns such as the foundations of political freedom, the nature of markets, the sources and circulation of wealth, the social impact of inequality and racism, and the connection and differentiation between the economic and political spheres.

Requirements

Required Textbooks

- Course Reader

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example).

Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Assignments and Grade Breakdown

- Classroom Participation 30% (2*15%)
This seminar involves thoughtful and active participation in class discussions and working groups. The classroom is a protected space and you should feel free to voice your arguments and comments.
Please do not hesitate to address the seminar leaders if you feel that this is not the case.
- Mid-term Exam (ca. 2,000 words) 25%
 - The mid-term exam for "Origins of Political Economy" will encompass a range of questions designed to evaluate students' grasp of the course material and their ability to engage in critical reflection. This assessment will include short answer prompts and essay questions that require detailed analysis and synthesis of key political concepts and theories discussed throughout the semester.
- 5 Response Papers (each ~500 words; 5*5%) 25%
Each student is required to write 5 response papers (1.5-spaced, 12 pt., Times New Roman) on sessions of their choice in the second half of the term. Response papers should include a short abstract of the primary texts' main tenets, an analysis (not simply your personal reaction) that embeds the reading in earlier class discussions, and the articulation of one central synthetic question that engages the issues and debates addressed in the reading as a starting point for broader discussion.
 - Response papers need to be submitted at 6pm on the night before the respective session.
 - Indicate your name, the number of the response paper, and the date of submission.
 - In consultation with the instructor students may have the option to give a 20-minute class presentation to substitute for two response papers.
- Group Film Presentations 20%
Groups will create a film (i.e., a filmed presentation, sketch, mini-documentary, etc.) which will be discussed in the lecture hall during the closing session. In their presentations, groups will look back at the term and revisit one pertinent tradition of thought or problem of political economy in more detail. Clips will be no longer than 5 minutes. Details and formats will be discussed with seminar leaders in the respective sections.

Schedule

Highlighted sessions will be held jointly in the Lecture Hall

Week Beginning	Session 1	Session 2	Assignments
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I. The Idea of Society and the Birth of Liberalism

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August 31,
2026

*****Hosted by Ewa Atanassow*****
Introductions
 Aristotle, *Politics*, bk 1 (ca. 350 BC)

Mercantilism
 Mun, *England's Treasure* (1628)
 De Las Casas, *Brief Account* (1552)

2
Sept 7

The Commonwealth
 Bodin, *Six Books* (1606), ch. 8
 Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Intr., 13, 17,
 18

Liberty and Property
 Locke, *Second Treatise* (1689): 2, 3, 4, 5, 9

3
Sept 14

Government and Commerce
 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748),
 Bks. 3, 20

Civilization as Degeneration
 Rousseau, *Second Discourse* (1755), Pt. 2
 Rousseau, *Social Contract* (1762), Bk. 1

4
Sept 21

Harmonious Orders
 Smith, *Wealth of Nati.* (1776), chs. 1.1-3
 Smith, *Theory of Moral Sen.* (1759)

Utilitarianism
 Bentham, *Principles of Morals and
 Legislation* (1789), chs. 1, 2, 4, 13

5
Sept 28

The Dismal Science
 Malthus, *On Population* (1798), chs. 1, 5, 10

Foreign Trade
 Hume, *On the Balance of Trade* (1752)
 Ricardo, *On Foreign Trade* (1817)

II. Challenges and Reconfigurations of Liberalism

6
Oct 5

*****Hosted by Kerry Bystrom*****
Liberalism and Women's Rights
 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of
 Women* (1792), Introduction, ch. 1
 Harriet Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of
 Women* (1851)

Industrialization, Liberty and Inequality
 Mill, *Employment of Children* (1832);
On Liberty (1859), ch. 1

7
Oct 12

*****Hosted by Boris Vormann*****
National Political Economy
 List, *The National System of Political
 Economy* (1841), chs. 11, 15

*****Mid-Term Exam*****

Fall Break

Fall break, Oct. 19 - Sun Oct. 25

8 Oct 26	Historical Materialism Marx, <i>Estranged Labor</i> (1844) Marx & Engels, <i>Communist Manifesto</i> (1848)	Saving Capitalism from Itself Keynes, <i>Econ. Conseq. of the Peace</i> (1919); <i>End of Laisser-Faire</i> (1926); <i>Open Letter to the President</i> (1933)
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9 Nov 2	Embedded Markets Polanyi, <i>The Great Transformation</i> (1944), chs. 6, 12, 21	Markets and Information Hayek, <i>Use of Knowledge in Soc.</i> (1945) Friedman, <i>Capitalism & Freedom</i> (1962), 1
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III. Postcolonial Development and Underdevelopment

10 Nov 9	Imperialism Luxemburg, <i>The Accumulation of Capital</i> (1913), ch. 27, 28 Lenin, <i>Imperialism</i> (1916)	Capitalism and Race James, <i>The Black Jacobins</i> (1963), Prol., ch. 2
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Five Response Papers in second half of the term

11 Nov 16	***Hosted by Riaz Partha Khan*** Reconstruction and Its Retelling DuBois, <i>Black Reconstruction</i> (1935), 1, 17	***Hosted by Aysuda Kölemen*** Development of Latin America Prebisch, <i>Economic Development of Latin America</i> (1950), excerpt
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12 Nov 23	Underdevelopment of Africa Rodney, <i>How Europe Underdeveloped Africa</i> (1972), Preface, ch. 6	The Developmental State in East Asia Amsden, <i>Asia's Next Giant</i> (1992), chs. 1, 2
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13 Nov 30	The Rise of China Confucius, <i>Analects</i> (3 rd century) Weber, <i>How China Escaped Shock Therapy</i> (2021), Intro and Conclusion	***Hosted by Erica Benner*** Nation-States and Empire Held, <i>C. Persp. on the Mod. State</i> (1989) Bhambra, <i>Reparatory Social Sci.</i> (2022)
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14 Dec 7	Democracy and Neoliberalism Sen, <i>Democracy as a Universal Value</i> (1999) Monbiot/Hutchison, <i>The Invisible Doctrine</i> (2024)
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Group Film Presentations

Course Overview, with Study Questions

For all readings, please familiarize yourself with the biographical background of the authors and the historical context of their writing. Who were the audiences they sought to reach? Why were their claims significant at that particular historical moment? How do their arguments refer back to earlier debates in political economy? (Consider collaborating in small groups to share tasks and generate questions to bring with you to seminar.)

I. The Idea of Society and the Birth of Liberalism

Following the so-called discovery of the New World, European societies began to reevaluate their feudal hierarchies and political arrangements. How should states be organized? Who should possess the right to govern? These foundational questions were central to the social contract theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries, who sought both to legitimize and transcend absolutist state power.

In contrast, liberalism emphasized economic liberty, political freedom, and individual self-determination. Most liberal thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries believed that markets were best suited to achieve these aims. Early liberalism, emerging in the context of bourgeois revolutions, highlighted the market's role in dismantling absolutist power structures. However, liberal thinkers responding to the social upheavals of industrialization began to infuse their theories with a greater concern for the social dimensions of economic life and the well-being of its participants.

Study Questions

- * Social contract theorists often imagined a "state of nature" to better understand the "state of society"—and to legitimize their critiques. How do conceptions of these states differ among the authors? What purposes do these distinctions serve?
- * Who is considered part of civil society according to each author? Who is excluded, and on what grounds are social inequalities deemed legitimate?
- * What types of liberties do the authors envision? At what point do liberties become problematic for society?
- * How do, or might, markets produce social order? Under what conditions are markets conducive to democracy? What legitimizes market-based order?
- * What are the limits of democracy, according to these thinkers? Should it be restrained? What institutions beyond the market make democracy function?

II. Challenges and Reconfigurations of Liberalism

The critical tradition in political economy can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, already discussed among the early social contract theorists. Unlike the liberal celebration of market society, Rousseau and later critical thinkers viewed the division of labor and economic liberalization with suspicion. The authors in this section challenge the supposed universality of liberal values, exposing the contradictions between liberal ideals and capitalist realities.

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, these thinkers called for more emancipatory forms of social organization. They sought to reclaim the potential for human creativity and agency in the face of alienating economic systems, proposing alternative models for understanding—and transforming—society.

Study Questions

- * What are the underlying assumptions about historical change in each text? How do the authors believe social transformation occurs, and what role does the intellectual play in that process?
- * How is the concept of alienation defined and used across time? What are the different forms it takes, and how does it function as a critique?

- * How do the authors conceptualize society in ways that challenge or disrupt existing conditions?
- * What would a fully marketized society look like? Is total commodification plausible or desirable?
- * What assumptions about human nature are embedded in these critiques? How do they resonate with or oppose earlier theories?

III. Postcolonial Development and Underdevelopment

In this section, we turn to the long shadows cast by colonialism and examine how imperial expansion shaped modern global political economy. The selected authors critically analyze how colonial rule structured economic exploitation, labor relations, and social hierarchies across vast geographies. They explore how colonialism devalued the lives and knowledge systems of colonized peoples, while enriching imperial centers through extraction and domination

These readings foreground people-centered histories of colonialism and highlight how its legacies continue to shape perceptions and material conditions in the Global South. Through this lens, students are invited to reconsider dominant liberal and Eurocentric accounts of economic development, and to explore alternative frameworks that acknowledge historical injustice and global interdependence.

Study Questions

- * How did colonial systems of labor, land use, and resource extraction contribute to the rise of capitalism in the global North? How is this connection addressed—or obscured—in classical political economy?
- * What do the authors argue about the relationship between capitalism and imperialism? How do their analyses build upon or challenge earlier critiques of liberalism?
- * How were race and racial hierarchies constructed and mobilized to justify colonial rule? How do the authors theorize race within the framework of political economy?
- * How are "development" and "underdevelopment" conceptualized? Are they internal, autonomous processes, or part of a global, relational dynamic?
- * What role do historical narratives, power, and epistemology play in shaping our understanding of colonialism and its consequences? How do the authors challenge prevailing accounts?
- * How can these texts inform present-day debates about global inequality, reparations, and the legitimacy of international financial and governance institutions?