

The Dean's Seminar

Social Sciences: SSID 300

Course Outline

Course Description: Close reading and critical evaluation, through roundtable discussion, of a significant work pertinent to the social sciences. Students will receive a Pass or Fail on the basis of participation alone. This 1-credit course involves no lectures, examinations or written assignments, and may be repeated up to three times with a different topic.

Prerequisite: Third-year standing in a declared Major or Minor in the Faculty of Social Sciences, and one of the following: mention in the Deans' Honour List or invitation from the Dean.

Seminar Facilitator: John Black, Dean of Social Sciences: john.black@viu.ca; 740-6391.

Location and Time: Building 355, Room 107; Fridays 1:00-2:30 pm.

Course Texts: 1. Karl Marx: *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) – selections.
2. Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).
3. Other online texts as necessary.

1. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>
2. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>
3. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/>

All texts are available free for download. Please print them for easy reference in class.

Nature and Purpose of the Course

The goal of the course is to promote participants' development as articulate practitioners of their own disciplines, skilled in its specialist critical and creative methodologies, and as generalists with the intellectual breadth to acknowledge the due relevance of other, related disciplines. The medium for this skill development is conversation, of a kind that is focused, sophisticated, reasoned and evaluative. Through examining a controversial work of broad significance to the social sciences in general, viewing it sometimes in its own terms and sometimes from the perspective of an outsider, we hope to position ourselves better as social scientists, highly-skilled employees and engaged citizens.

To these ends, regular attendance is mandatory, and the onus is on every member to contribute not only to the conversation, but also to what the topic on any given day will be. The Dean facilitates discussion, and participates himself on the same basis as others, but does not predetermine the topic, save by insisting that it be focused and related to the material selected. In order to allow for constructive discussion in which all are involved, enrolment is restricted to 15. Students must be prepared for the demands for active engagement that such a format places on them. Please see the Notes on Seminar Participation below.

Extremely Tentative Reading Schedule

The reading to be assigned week-by-week will be handled very flexibly, in accordance with the naturally developing direction and pace of the ongoing discussion. The following is a rough guide as to the size of the reading demands, but the seminar will be successful even if we omit some readings, or include others. The general principle is to support *close* reading, that is to say, reading of high analytical quality: texts should be read multiple times, and to enable this the length of the readings will be kept relatively low.

Jan 10	Course Introduction – no reading
Jan 17	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Preface, Wages of Labour, pp. 1-10
Jan 24	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Profit of Capital, pp. 10-19
Jan 31	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Rent of Land, pp. 20-27
Feb 7	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Estranged Labour... pp. 28-39
Feb 14	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Private Property... pp. 40-49
Feb 21	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts</i> : Human Requirements... pp. 49-62
Feb 28	Study Days – no reading, no class
Mar 7	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i> : Editorial Introduction and Prefaces, pp. 2-13
Mar 14	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i> : Introduction and Ch. I, pp. 14-21
Mar 21	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i> : Ch. 2, pp. 22-27
Mar 28	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i> : Chs. 3 and 4, pp. 28-34, plus pp. 55-57
Apr 4	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i> : Related Material, pp. 35-54
Apr 11	Taking Stock – no reading

Notes on Seminar Participation

Seminar participation is not a competitive sport wherein some individuals win only because others lose. Nor is it a spectator sport where most enjoy watching while others play. It is best played by a team in which each individual does her best, with her own unique talents and understanding, to keep the game going for everyone. The seminar is a study group where all of us meet to discuss a work that we have read thoughtfully before we arrive. Our goal is to enhance one another's understanding of the issues raised by the text. This is done best when we focus on one topic at a time. Listening and responding specifically and effectively to what others say will keep the discussion focused and ensure that, when the topic changes, everyone will understand where it is going and why.

While seminar participants will treat one another with respect and courtesy, this requirement by no means excludes serious debate around the text and the issues it raises. The opinions expressed around the seminar table become the common property of the group. The group functions best when it gives these opinions a fair hearing and examines them together. You should feel free to ask your colleagues to explain and defend opinions they have expressed and should expect that, from time to time, you will fail to persuade your colleagues to adopt particular positions. You should not feel deflated when this happens. One of the most important services that your peers can perform for you is to help you examine the strengths and weaknesses of your own ideas. If they prove weak, you and others who initially agree with you will have learned something important. If they prove strong, you will benefit your colleagues. The seminar, like any study group, is a place to test out many positions and approaches to fascinating issues and questions. The privilege of being invited to examine the opinions of others comes with the responsibility of examining, with their help, your own. As long as opinions and positions are being tested out in seminar, the seminar will function in a productive way.

It is important to remember that the seminar is not a counselling group. We are there to discuss the selected work, and your job is to support your comments and opinions with evidence drawn directly from the text. While participants will occasionally draw upon personal experiences to illustrate something they want to say, the focus of the group should always be on the topic under discussion and never on a particular member of the seminar, including yourself.

Remember, good participation is not a matter of how much you say but of the value of what you say as a contribution to shared understanding. Dominating the discussion will not allow others to examine your ideas. Never having much to say will deprive the seminar of your valuable ideas and critical abilities. Straying off topic and speaking without listening can derail what might otherwise be a profitable discussion. Further, good seminar participation involves not only having an idea to share but also gently encouraging quiet colleagues to speak; politely but firmly requesting dominating members to let others respond; pointing out from time to time when the focus has switched too abruptly or is missing; and asking for clarification when you can't remember or figure out what's being talked about.

An intellectually satisfying experience, then, is absolutely central to what the Dean's Seminar is trying to achieve, and we are very concerned to see that students all contribute effectively, especially those who may still find themselves somewhat reluctant to speak up in a group discussion. Anyone who continues to find this a problem should discuss the matter thoroughly with the Dean, so that together they can work out some ways of resolving the difficulties.

The most important components in the Dean's assessment of your performance in the seminar are the following: attendance, preparation for the seminar (evidence of thoughtful completion of the required reading), and the quality and quantity of your participation in the seminar discussions.

Preparing for the Seminar

To get the most out of the seminar experience, you should be thoroughly prepared. It is highly recommended that you read over all of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* material before the first class; similarly, read over all of the subsequent material during Study Days. After that, prepare for each specific seminar by taking the following steps:

- Read the assigned material once through to get its general direction and gist.
- Read it a second time more thoroughly, paying attention to the lines of argument presented and evaluating them as you go: Are there hidden assumptions which one might question? Are the reasons or pieces of evidence given for a particular conclusion themselves (likely to be) true? Assuming for the sake of argument that they are (or were) true, do (or would) they give us no rational choice but to accept the conclusion?
- Formulate one question about the reading material which you would like to put to the seminar when it assembles.

The subject-matter of the seminar is thus the reading material assigned and *your* responses to it. The purpose of the seminar is to enable you to enhance *your* critical skills. Therefore you should NOT prepare by reading secondary scholarship or other sources dealing with the work or author we are discussing. Relying on the opinions of others, no matter how well-founded they are, will restrict your ability to develop your own abilities.

Evaluation: Attendance and Participation

Successful completion will result in a Pass (CR), unsuccessful in a Fail (F). The Dean will base the allocation of these grades on the scale explained below for rating performance in each seminar. To receive the Pass grade, a student's marks must average at least 3 out of 6.

Failure to attend will be heavily penalised, unless it is explained by *documented* personal reasons such as illness. The first absence will earn a mark of 0 for that session, the second a mark of -1, the third a mark of -2, and so forth, with the penalty increasing by one on each occasion.

The following scale gives a guide to the factors the Dean will consider in evaluating seminar participation, as well as a picture of their impact on your mark:

0 or less: Absence; the student is physically absent without a documented reason.

1: Mere attendance, with no contribution to the discussion; the student is physically present, but otherwise absent.

2: Participation, but without significant contribution to the discussion; the student takes part in the conversation, but is ineffective because poorly prepared, insensitive, or uncooperative in the group setting.

3: Significant but limited contribution; the student offers some useful contributions, but they are limited in quantity or quality.

4: Thoroughly satisfactory contribution; the student is well prepared, and offers useful comments (which might yet be more incisive, or more relevant, or further developed).

5: Excellent contribution; the student is very well prepared, maintains a good relationship with others (i.e., contributes actively to the dynamics of the seminar), and offers useful comments in a constructive way.

6: Exemplary contribution; the student makes a major contribution and not just to the understanding of the material but to the social dynamics of the session, a contribution which it would be difficult to imagine being any better.

Plagiarism

That there is no written work in the course does not mean plagiarism is impossible. If in discussion you rely on ideas or analyses derived from other sources, you must be honest about this by identifying as far as you can their source.

Future Dean's Seminars

As far as the demands of his position allow, the Dean will offer a Seminar on one of a range of different topics and texts each Fall and Spring semester. The course number (SSID 300) will have an alphabetic suffix (A, B, etc.) in order to distinguish the topics. Students may take the seminar up to three times on different topics, marked by different suffixes. In this way you can build up the equivalent of a standard elective in your degree. The Dean is open to suggestions for topics and texts to be explored in future seminars.