ENGL 308 A: MARXISM AND LITERARY THEORY

MARXIST LITERARY THEORY

- Spring 2016

ADDITIONAL DETAILS:

This course will introduce you to several key works by Marx and his collaborator, Engels, and to the debates that have grown up around them. At the center of the course is the question of how a body of 19th century writings principally about political economy (a.k.a economics), history, and philosophy got taken up by 20th century literary scholars, and how a distinct tradition of interpreting literary culture from a Marxist perspective, using Marxist tools, has developed over time. By contrast to other models of literary criticism which often seek to find in literary texts transcendent messages and universal meanings, Marxist literary theory has sought to situate literary and cultural texts within their historical contexts of production and reception; to understand the power dynamics—including dynamics informed by gender, race, and class conflict—that shape textual meaning; and, to understand how such conflicts impact the literary work's political message, genre, style and form.

Our study of Marxist theory will involve us in close, intensive reading of dense philosophical arguments. We will also seek to understand how a materialist method indebted to Marxism has emerged as a dominant method within contemporary literary scholarship, and thus how diverse literary critical practices (often given such labels as “critical theory,” “feminist theory,” and “critical race theory”) are, in fact, within the Marxist analytical tradition. Over the course of the quarter we will also read two fictional texts. We will consider how our understanding of each might be shaped by the Marxist frameworks that the course explores, and how such texts, in turn, can be used to reveal the (in)adequacy of Marxist methodologies.

Course organization

This course is organized into three units that treat several of the issues and concepts repeatedly returned to by Marx and his readers and interpreters: I) History and Class; II) Capitalism and Ideology; and III) Ideology, Literature and Culture. In Unit I, we will focus on the idea of class, paying special attention to how social and economic classes function as motors for historical transformation (historical materialism), and how class has been articulated with race and gender in the United States and globally. In Unit II, we will explore the concept of ideology as it was first developed by Marx to describe the operations and distortions of
capitalism, and then by later theorists to describe the violence of “idea systems” that obscure human exploitation. In Unit III, we will examine how the ideas of historical materialism and ideology can be used to study literature and culture more broadly.

Catalog Description:
Introduces Marxist theory and methodology. Explores how and why Marx's writings, Marxist theory, and materialist methods became central to the study of literature and culture over the course of the twentieth century.

GE Requirements:
Visual, Literary, and Performing Arts (VLPA)

Status: Active
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