MARX AND FREUD

They said, “You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.”  
The man replied, “Things as they are  
are changed upon the blue guitar.”  

Wallace Stevens

The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it.  
Karl Marx

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man [sic]. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other one of the two ‘Heavenly Powers,’ eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?  
Sigmund Freud

The author...begs [the readers] not to react too quickly to their first impulses of criticism and dislike by rejecting [this material]. Psycho-analysis brings forward so much that is new, and among it so much that contradicts traditional opinions and wounds deeply-rooted feelings, that it is bound at first to provoke denial. A reader who suspends his/[her] judgment and allows psycho-analysis as a whole to make its impression on him/[her] will perhaps become open to a conviction that even this undesired novelty is worth knowing and is indispensable for anyone who wishes to understand the mind and human life.  
Sigmund Freud

[Reread this paragraph, substituting “Marxian analysis” for “psycho-analysis.”]

We shall require a new manner of thinking if mankind [sic] is to survive.  
Albert Einstein
The Perspective of the Course

People tend to accept changes in paradigms—the models by which we understand how things are organized and work—slowly and, if at all, with much pain. Challenges to accepted ways of interpreting the world (e.g., the earth is the center of the universe, humans are the culmination of the six days of divine creation, rain dances can end droughts) are almost always met with suspicion, disbelief, hostility, and sometimes death. (Consider, e.g., how questioning of their basic paradigms have been met from time to time by the Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism, the erstwhile Soviet government, the United States government, “free market” ideologists, and other guardians of official ways of explaining the world.)

It is difficult enough for new scientific paradigms to be accepted (Copernicus, Darwin, the germ theory of disease, cosmology). Harder still is entertaining the possibility of paradigm shift in efforts to account for human behavior. There are deep political and emotional investments in believing certain “truths” about society and “human nature,” and few people welcome the prospect that those are “truths” rather than Truths. Even at universities, which consecrate the search for truth no matter what, the same resistances to paradigm challenge can be found as at other institutions and on the street.

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud have done more to shake confidence in accepted explanations of self, society, and their interrelations than have any other (all other?) thinkers of the past several centuries. The work of each is original, striking, provocative, troubling, sometimes erroneous, and profound. Despite the current fashionable rejection of most of the innovations of both, they seem ever on the minds of selected serious thinkers. Much of contemporary social science is either exploration of the meanings and implications of their systems or elaborate, sometimes even frantic, efforts to refute them.

This year, given the turmoil in the United States economic system and its ramifications for much of the world, and given the remarkable appearance and extraordinarily rapid spread of the Occupy movement, Marx may be examined a bit more sympathetically than has been the case in recent years. I urge students to consider this possibility as we embark on studying the greatest and clearest critic of what we know as our economic system and the society in which it is embedded. Indeed, I find that no other thinker can make as much sense of the conditions that led to Occupy and the possibilities for fundamental social transformation.

Marx is radical in his sociology and conservative in his social psychology. Freud is radical in his social psychology and conservative in his sociology. Each attempts to discover not only explanations for human suffering but practices for reducing it. It is surely the action implications of their systems (revolutionary political movements for Marx; psychoanalysis as therapy for Freud) as much as their content that bother their detractors and nearly anyone new to them. And for good reason. With whatever errors and limits, if Marx is right concerning the structure of domination in societies, and if Freud is right about dynamics of internal and external oppression, then society as it is so far is responsible for needless suffering; in complex ways, it is its multifaceted context and its cause.
It can be argued that the study of the work of these two thinkers is essential to a liberal arts education. Their writings are best approached skeptically and also in a spirit of inquiry open enough to challenge paradigms and to take that endeavor seriously, really and fully seriously. Both are best encountered the way Coleridge urged poetry be approached: with a “willing suspension of disbelief.”

Both Marx and Freud are out of fashion now. Entire nations and an empire that claimed to organize itself according to Marxian propositions have recently, formally failed. At the same time, most recent liberation movements in our society as well as conservative opposition to them have declared psychoanalytic thinking reactionary, irrelevant, sexist, homophobic, erroneous, or all of the above.

To make matters even more complicated, the ideas of Marx and Freud are widely regarded as irreconcilable. Although at certain points that is surely true, it is the thesis of this course that each thinker’s system very powerfully enhances and complements the other.

We will read basic theoretical works by Marx and his co-worker Engels and by Freud. We will also read a book that combines elements of both thinkers (Fromm) and a feminist revision of Freud (Baker Miller). And we will see one extraordinarily powerful movie, Citizen Kane, which brings the two thinkers together in some remarkable ways.

Setup of the course

The class meets Tuesdays and Fridays 11:00-12:20. Depending on the final size of the class, there may be an additional discussion group hour. Steady presence at all classes and discussion groups will make it possible to grapple with the broad range of issues raised in the course; i.e., regular attendance is required. Occasionally we may have guest speakers. We may have one or two evening meetings for speakers and/or videos.

Written work

One of my goals in this course is to have a conversation going among students and professor. One way to do this is through written responses to readings and other course materials. Toward that end, I ask you to work together in groups of two in writing short response papers several times during the semester.

Each paper should, staying close to the texts, demonstrate competence with the texts and raise some issues, problems, questions, insights, disturbances, etc. connected with the reading for that period. It also can include comments on class discussions that you feel moved to extend, criticize, etc. The last paper should include a summary discussion of how you relate so far to Marx and Freud and the claim that they interconnect.

1. Cooperative learning. Growing experience suggests that students learn more when they study and write together than when they work strictly on their own. Toward
this end, students will be required to write papers in groups of two or more. If this is a new experience, so be it. TAs and the instructor will do their best to help facilitate this way of working. Students will be required also to write final papers in groups of two or more. If you are convinced you cannot learn to, or bear to, write with others, please do not take this course. On the other hand, even if it seems risky, you might chance learning more and in a relatively new way.

2. It is well to learn to write succinctly. Practice getting to the point quickly and saying what you mean. The papers should be held to three pages, four at most.

3. If you find the reading difficult, summarizing it to get a hold of it can be useful. The point of this part of a response paper is to ask if your interpretation of what the author said makes sense to the reader. But do not limit the paper to this. We know you can write book reports. Response papers are meant to be much more than that. Do not restate what the author said in the author’s terms. Quotations may be used to illustrate a point or ask a question, but do not repeat the author without interpreting in your words, and do not write a paper that is mostly quotations.

4. Remember that all reading is interpretation. We never focus on it all, we never comprehend it all, and we do not know exactly what the author had in mind. Nor does that matter. What matters is what the reader makes of what is read.

5. Include your own questions about the reading, your own critical reactions, your own hesitations, reservations, etc. And most important: your own insights. Strive to make connections that the author and the reader may not have made. Strive to connect the reading with other reading, with central ideas and issues as they develop in the course, with your understanding of the world, with films and novels and news events, and with your emotional, political, and intellectual reactions to what you see in society and in your life.

6. The premium in these papers is on showing the reader that you are grappling with the course materials, have opened yourself up to the possibility that there is something in them for you, and can think creatively with what we are studying. The premium also is on integrating what may seem like disparate materials and struggling to make sense of them in your thinking, in your reality as a citizen, and in your reality as a thinking, feeling, viable actor in society.

7. In the response papers, you may work with class discussions, professor’s and TAs’ views, world events, whatever, but always in the context of the readings. I.e., no riffing from the top of your head on interesting things that may be relevant to the course but are not anchored in the texts. We are looking for real struggle with reading and other course materials.

A final paper intended to draw the course together will be due Tuesday, 5/1.
Group project

Students in groups of five or six will be asked, by the fourth week of the course, to select one video, novel, or social institution to examine, collectively, from both Marxian and Freudian perspectives. In the last four weeks of the course, each group will be asked to present as full an analysis as it can, in 20-30 minutes, of the work of art or institution chosen for analysis. Final papers may include a portion that goes into further depth into the topic examined.

The point of this exercise is to study an area where both Marx and Freud can be applied in ways that reveal insights and problematics of that area and also to explore in what ways Marxian and Freudian analyses can complement one another fruitfully. In addition to works of art and institutions, possible themes, which would need to be based on suitable texts, could include racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, classism, homophobia, nationalism, and more topics that might occur to you. Other issues and forms are welcome if approved by the professor. An alternative topic might be a critical look at Marx and Freud in attempts to come to terms with the complexities of their thinking and students’ insights, learning, and misgivings about both thinkers’ work.

Outside events

Attend 3 Marx and Freud-related events (preferably but not necessarily) on campus during the semester. The professor will advise you as to when such programs are going to happen and will welcome suggestions about programs that might not have come to his attention.

The final written work for the course will include a paragraph or two of very brief discussions of each of these programs and their relevance to the course.

Grading

The course assumes serious interest in its topic and does not assume any background in it or sociology. The premium is on understanding and working with the concepts and readings and on thinking creatively with them. It is assumed that real learning involves risk and re-thinking assumptions and familiar paradigms (with no preordained or “right” outcome) as well as learning new information. We will pay attention to such matters as involvement, keeping up with the reading, attendance, and participation in class and in discussion sections, as well as evidence of real struggle with the ideas and texts of the course. All students are encouraged to take active part in the larger class, but we respect that some people are reluctant to do so.

A--mastery of readings, concepts, and exercises; full participation, engagement, risk-taking, and growth; grappling with the course and coming to your own insights about its issues, its implications, its relation to yourself.

B--clear understanding of course materials and conscientious participation but little evidence of risk-taking and growth or grappling with the course toward one's own insights. Not full or steady participation.
C—fuzzy, incomplete, lethargic relationship with course materials, minimal involvement of self in course, little risk-taking and growth, no insights of one’s own, sporadic participation.

D—same as C but moreso.

E—trying to wing it by leaning too much on others’ understanding, not writing papers fully germane to the readings and central concepts of the course, rare participation, etc.

To pass the course, the student must do all written work, attend the 3 outside events, come to class, and take part in discussion sections. All written work must be backed up on discs. Computers crashing, etc. are not acceptable excuses for not completing work.

REQUIRED READINGS

1. Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents
2. ““, Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis
3. Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom
4. Jean Baker Miller, Toward a New Psychology of Women
5. R.C. Tucker, ed., The Marx-Engels Reader

RECOMMENDED READINGS

1. Shlomo Avineri, The Political and Social Thought of Karl Marx (excellent secondary source on Marx)
2. Anna Freud, Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense (useful major extension of Freud into the arena of individual and social components and implications of “ego defenses”)
3. Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (one of Freud’s four major short monographs on implications for society and culture of individual psychological development)
4. Gordon Fellman Rambo and the Dalai Lama: the Compulsion to Win and Its Threat to Human Survival (a Freudo-Marxian synthesis around the question of how uncontrolled adversarialism is destroying society and nature, with suggestions for how the alternative mode of behavior, mutuality, might be brought into more prominent play)
5. Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (a Marxo-Freudian synthesis around the issue of how and why people flee from the freedom they also seem to seek seek)
6. Joel Kovel, White Racism (a Marxo-Freudian study of what is in U.S. racism for whites)
7. Mary Lou Shields, Sea Run (a psychoanalytic autobiography)
8. Cornell West, Race Matters (a look at some aspect U.S. racism from Marxian as well as personality perspectives)
Schedule of Readings

Please complete the reading by the Tuesday of the week for which it is assigned.

(Questions accompanying response paper assignments are suggestions only. Feel free to design your own questions and discussions, making sure you always anchor the discussion in the texts. The papers are due on the Tuesday following the assignment.)

Wk 1, 1/17  course introduction: paradigm shift and Marx and Freud.

Wk 2, 1/24  alienation, property, money


**Due on 2/3. response paper on the readings of Wks 1-3. I encourage you find your own way of highlighting the central issues in the reading. Here are probes, though, if you prefer them: What central issues in Marx have emerged already? Where do you recognize them in your own lives? What problems/contradictions/inconsistencies do you find in Marx so far?

Wk 4, 2/7  commodities, use value and exchange value, fetishism
Marx, from Capital, in Tucker, 302-317; 319-329.

Wk 5, 2/14.  institutions and history

**Due 6/24. response paper on the readings of Wks 4 and 5. Again, bring your own way to bear on discussing this reading. Alternatively: What does Marx mean by commodities and by ruling ideas? What are some of the ruling ideas that have affected you in your life? In what ways are commodities themselves ruling ideas? Briefly, where are you so far in Marx?

Vacation 2/20-2/24

Wk 6, 2/28  introduction to Freud: the psychology of errors

Wk 7, 3/6  dreams
Introductory Lectures, chs. 5-9, 11-14.
Wk 8, 3/13  sexuality and neurosis  
Introductory Lectures, chs. 16-20.

**Due 3/20: response paper on the readings of Wks 6-8. Your formulation, or: What are Freud’s central ideas so far? Try to find examples from literature and/or daily life to illustrate them.

Wk 9, 3/20  neurosis and therapy  
Introductory Lectures, chs. 21-24.

Wk 10, 3/27  neurosis and therapy (cont.)  

**Due 4/3 response paper on the readings of Wks 9-10. Your own take on what to discuss, or: What does Freud mean by neurosis? How does he explain it and treatment of it?

Wk 11, 4/3 (no class 4/6)  personality and society  
Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents

freedom and defenses against exercising it  
Fromm, Escape from Freedom. Forwards and chs. 1-4

Vacation: No classes 4/6-4/13

Wk 12, 4/17  Fromm, continued: chs.5-7 and Appendix

Wk 13, 4/24  women and society  
Baker Miller, Toward a New Psychology of Women

**response paper on the readings of Wks 11-13. How do these books fit together? What in these works is offered to explain the nature of human suffering and possibilities for ameliorating it?

Wk 14, 5/1  last day of class. Catchup and putting it all together

THE FINAL PAPER FOR THE COURSE IS DUE TUESDAY MAY 1

Students with special needs

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the professor immediately.