

GLOBAL CAPITALISM
Claudio Sopranzetti
4 Credits, Fall Term, Elective Class
Office Hours: By appointment
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Course description

Capitalism is one of the most defining features of the history of our species over the last centuries, its way of organizing economic, social, political, and ecological relations to each other and to the world around us. This class aims to conceptualize the birth, defining characteristics, historical development and contemporary shape of capitalism. While this narrative is often framed as a diffusionist story, starting from Europe and spreading out, this course takes a different route. It aims to recover capitalism's global nature since its origin, world-making and environment-making characteristics, and its need to always create and recreate frontiers, occupy spaces outside of it, and reorganize social relations and life itself.

In this sense, while the course does not require previous knowledge, some familiarity with traditional Marxist or Weberian traditions of analysis of capitalism would be useful as we will not start from there, as often classes like this do. If you do not have that please reach out to me before class and I can suggest some preliminary readings.

The course is divided into three parts.

In the first one, we will focus on analyzing the building block of capitalism and focus on three elements: market, states, and labor.

From there, we will move to a historical analysis of the global genesis of capitalism. Rather than focusing on the usual discussion about Industrial Revolution or protestant ethics we direct our attention to exploring the role of colonialism, patriarchy, and the management of nature in what Marx called “primitive accumulation,” an expropriation of resources necessary for jump-starting capitalism.

Finally, we will explore contemporary forms and operations of capital. Once again, rather than taking a Euro-American starting point, our attention is on the global nature of these developments and their world-making features.

Course Requirements and Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will have developed a sense of what capitalism is, both in its history and current forms, and explored its global history. One of the main purposes is to historicize capitalism and, in so doing, question the diffused idea that this is a “natural” system that responds to universal human needs and characteristics, rather than having emerged out of specific configurations which could change and disappear in the future.

Please notice that this is **a reading-heavy class**. We will have quite a bit of material to go over and to discuss in class. I promise you it will be rewarding but if you are looking for a low intensity class this is **NOT** the one.

Course Assessment:

The purpose of this course is **NOT** to give you a grade. We all learn and grow in different ways and a grade is nothing but a temporary assessment (with all of its limits) of the work you have done for a class: it is not a judgment about your value, your intelligence, or your skills. Unfortunately, we live in a system in which we have to conclude a class with a grade but our priority should not be that, but rather learn in the process what we are curious about, give some answers, and open up further questions. Humankind and knowledge have moved through this, **NOT** through grades. With this in mind, my objective is for every one of you to grow in this class, you do that and grades will not be an issue. However, if grades create anxiety for you here is a breakdown and how the assessments are constructed in my class

Participation (25%)

Presentation (25%)

Final paper (50%)

Participation:

This means regular attendance and contribution to the discussion, whether orally or in written form. We all know that we have different levels of comfort talking in class and taking part in it. Participating actively may mean very different things but cannot look like not speaking up at all nor not turning in written responses in time. Participating in class is not about how many minutes we talk, or even giving right or wrong answers. It means helping each other to think and reflect collectively on the materials we read and on what they mean for us as people. Examples from your own experience, movies, research are essential to our discussions so make what we read work for you, bring in your own questions and curiosities, and don't be afraid of wrong answers, there aren't any! Class participation accounts for 25% of the final grade.

Group Presentation

Starting from Week 2, a student or a group of students will open the discussion by presenting the weekly materials. You will be expected to organize the presentation and speak for no more than 20 minutes during which you should offer a critical assessment of the week's readings that link them to previous discussions and pose some open-ended questions to start the discussion in class. Please do not spend time summarizing the readings. You are not obliged to restrict yourself to the readings indicated and you are encouraged to draw on your general readings and to bring in material and case studies relevant to the topic, whatever its source. Please consult with the lecturer for advice on further readings beyond what is given here. These also will count for 25% of your final grade.

Non-presenting students must complete all the required readings, as these will be the basis for discussion in class. This is a seminar class so it will be essential to come prepared. They are also expected to come with a minimum of at least one question or issue per topic and ideally with a sketch of how they would try to answer the questions posed. Participation in discussion is essential!

Final Paper

This will be a take-home paper in which you explore a theme, form of capitalism, accumulation process, or post-capitalist idea based on the material we discussed in class. By week 6 you are supposed to have an idea of what you will be writing about and to meet with me in office hours to discuss it, so we can agree on it and I can provide you with extra material. Ultimately this is a research paper, grounded on your own interest. My role is to help you find the material to explore it and to help you construct an argument. This will count 50% of the final grade.

Learning Activities and Teaching Methods

The course consists of lectures and seminar discussions.

SPECIFIC WEEKLY READINGS WILL BE POSTED SOON

PART I: THE BUILDING BLOCKS

WEEK 1: Introduction – What is Capitalism?

WEEK 2: Making the Market

WEEK 3: Capitalism and the State

WEEK 4: Labour

PART II: THE GLOBAL ORIGINS

WEEK 5: Racial Capitalism and Uneven Development

WEEK 6: Enclosures and the Government of Nature

WEEK 7: Patriarchy and Unpaid Reproductive Labour

PART III: CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CAPITAL

WEEK 8: Global Neoliberalism

WEEK 9: Global Connection

WEEK 10: Varieties of Capitalisms - A Feminist Manifesto

WEEK 11: Operations of Capital

WEEK 12: Surveillance Capitalism and New Enclosures