



Course Syllabus  
ECON 100: Capitalism and Its Discontents  
Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30 – 1:50 p.m.  
133 Chancellors

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### **Course Background**

There is something extremely paradoxical about a market economy. The production process we find there exhibits tremendous complexity, and the efforts of all the minutely specialized workers must somehow be coordinated with one another in order for the system to function. Think about the pen you are holding in your hand at this moment. Think about all the highly specialized workers, all over the world, who played a part in producing your pen, the components that went into the pen (the metal ball-point, the ink, the plastic shell, the tube inside the shell holding the ink, etc.) and the raw materials that were used to produce the components. Then think of the workers who had a hand in producing the machinery that was used in each of these stages of producing your pen. Okay, that's only the pen in your hand for

starters; think about the shirt on your back and the shoes on your feet, and all the complexity behind their creation, too.

A market economy encompasses a highly complex and intricate system of production that demands careful coordination of its minutely specialized parts in order for the system to function. If ink in the right quantities is not produced and delivered at the right times to the right factories, for example, then pens will not be produced in sufficient quantities. However, there is no conscious coordinating entity, such as the government, that oversees the system and makes sure that the activities of each producer mesh well with the activities of each other producer, thereby assuring that the system basically functions. Instead, we have a radical decentralization of decision-making about the vital matter of the production and distribution of goods and services: each individual decides what to produce and what to consume. Moreover, self-interest guides each individual's decisions about these matters. Benefitting the economy is the farthest consideration from your mind when you decide what career to pursue and what to buy at the store. Benefit to you is all that enters your consciousness. So, do you see the paradox now? We have an unimaginably complex system of production completely lacking in conscious central coordination and direction, where individual self-interest guides each economic decision, and yet the system somehow holds together over time. In fact, with respect to raising living standards, it seems to function reasonably well. Adam Smith believes he has explained this paradox, and the course will explore his vision of how this happens.

Consider another paradox: as part of our Western cultural heritage, residues of the Christian values of charity and benevolence still persist in modern morality. We hold benevolent, caring people in much higher regard than selfish people, do we not? We believe that people have moral worth and should be treated as ends rather than as means to an end (to borrow a phrase from the Christian philosopher, Immanuel Kant), do we not? How can an economy whose motor force is individual self-interest pass moral muster? Adam Smith argues that competitive capitalism is completely in keeping with our most basic moral sentiments, and the course will explore Smith's reasoning behind this claim. Karl Marx, by contrast, vehemently disagrees with Smith on both of Smith's major points. He offers extended lines of reasoning concluding that capitalism is sowing the seeds of its own destruction and has dubious moral legitimacy. The course will explore his views on these matters, too.

Although they are philosophers and not economists, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger offer profound criticisms of modernity, especially the normative commitments found in modern Western culture. Their criticisms of modernity encompass the normative underpinnings of the market system, and we will examine their views as well.

### **Course Project**

So much for the ideas we will cover in the course. Let us turn now to something else about the course that may have an enduring impact on you. Have you ever envisioned yourself having a presence on the Internet, a presence in the form of your own Website where you discuss, analyze and critique the doctrine of two of history's most intriguing economic thinkers, namely

Adam Smith and Karl Marx? Have you ever considered how having such a presence could promote other goals of yours, such as getting into graduate school, embarking on a career after finishing your undergraduate degree, impressing your family members, friends and social acquaintances, or just developing and presenting to the broader public your own thoughts on economic and normative issues? A major undertaking you will engage in for the course is developing just such a Website, one which you can continue expanding and refining long after the class ends.

### **Course Objectives**

Instead of focusing on content as the ultimate aim, the course emphasizes the process of the initial discovery of various thinkers' insights, which is followed by the creative process of synthesizing these insights into one's own insights, which, in turn, culminates in the public presentation of one's own synthesis. The economics covered in the course is actually subsidiary to this process of initial discovery, creative synthesis and public presentation. In fact, the economics we cover serves as the medium for this process. You will use the ideas explored in the readings and classroom lectures/discussions to create your own Website on a topic covered in the course, but you will go well beyond the readings, lectures and discussions as you do this. Your Website will go live on the Internet toward the end of the semester, and the College will continue to host your Website on its server for long after the course ends, if you so choose.

By the end of the semester, you should have achieved the following:

1. You will have developed a sophisticated Website, including hyperlinks, visual aids and embedded media. In the Website, you will provide detailed expositions, critiques and extensions of the ideas of the two economists and the two critics of modernity covered in the course. This is done in order to develop your ability to discover and explore certain "great ideas", then individually synthesize what you discover and present your synthesis publicly. Another purpose this serves is to develop your communication skills in a medium other than the traditional essay/term paper one.
2. You will have provided critical yet constructive feedback to other students as they develop their Websites. This is done in order to develop your ability to work collaboratively with others on intellectual endeavors.
3. You will have made two presentation to your peers. The purpose of this is to develop your verbal communication skills.
4. You will have self-confidence in your creative intellectual abilities such that you will keep your Website live long after the course ends. You will continue to develop it, refine it, and take it in new directions as your concerns and values go in new directions over the course of your early adult life.

And, oh by the way, one technicality that I have been told is advisable to put on this syllabus: Successful completion of this course satisfies the College of William & Mary's COLL 100 requirement.

## About Myself

I grew up in Denver, Colorado and am a proud graduate of Iver C. Ranum High School. Unfortunately, my high school no longer exists, for after I graduated, the Colorado State Department of Education shut it down because the standardized test scores of its students indicated that the school was academically ineffective. (Hmm, that might explain a lot.)

I received my Bachelor of Science in Accounting at the University of Denver in 1983. I was a very bookish, nerdy type of student – you know, the type you find in the library on a Friday evening – and decided to pursue a career where I would get paid to indulge my bookishness. I had taken a particular liking to economics, so I thought I'd take a shot at obtaining the credentials I would need to become an economics professor.

I stuck around a couple more years at the University of Denver to earn my Master of Arts in Economics degree in 1985 and then went on to earn my Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Michigan in 1990. I met my wife while at the U. of M., and it was love at first sight! Er, well, it least it was at my end. We got married the same year I received my doctorate, and she has managed to put up with me ever since. We have one son, who recently completed his undergraduate degree in computer science and statistics at the University of Auckland. (Fortunately, he inherited his brains from his mom.) He is now working as a forensic analyst for Deloitte in New Zealand.

After obtaining my doctorate, I worked as a visiting faculty member at Oakland University, located just outside of Detroit, while my wife was finishing-up her doctorate. My wife then took a job as a research scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, so I followed her east, first as a visiting faculty member at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania and then as a tenure-track faculty member at Dowling College on Long Island, where I started working in 1994. The happiest years of my adult life were the years spent on Long Island. Our son grew up there, and I loved my job at Dowling. Sad to say, things came crashing down in June, 2016, when Dowling had to close its doors because it went broke. I then became an academic refugee, and the Department of Economics here at William and Mary graciously offered me asylum as a visiting faculty member.

My all-time favorite intellectual is Friedrich Nietzsche, an existentialist philosopher who wrote his last book in 1888, just before he went insane. My favorite living intellectual is actually a three-way tie between Kathleen Higgins, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas, Julian Young, a philosophy professor at Wake Forest University, and David P. Levine, who wrote a great deal about economics in the past but now publishes in the area of psychology. My favorite food is Sichuan-style stir-fried tofu with vegetables. My favorite novel is *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. My favorite psychopath is Athena Walker, whom you can follow at <https://www.quora.com/profile/Athena-Walker>.

I enjoy reading about philosophy and history, whenever I find the opportunity to do so. I will be spending much of my time browsing books over in Swem Library, especially in the vicinity of the

“B” call numbers. If you come across me there, please do not hesitate to stop and chat. I do not mind the distraction at all. I also spend much of my time at the Campus Recreation Center since, at my advanced age, I get achy bones if I do not work out regularly. In addition, I struggle with beer-belly issues, and nothing motivates trips to the gym quite like a beer-belly issue. You are more than welcome to join me on my workout circuit, provided you can resist the urge to laugh at the sight of me working out.

If, for some strange reason, you would like to know about the areas I have published in, just set your browser to <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=I3AkrcQAAAAJ&hl=en>, and a link to my Google Scholar profile should appear. As you will see, I have been a dilatant in a small number of disparate fields in economics and thus am an expert at nothing. I pride myself, however, on being a connoisseur of beer, hence the beer-belly issues.

### **Text and Course Materials**

There is no assigned textbook for the course. All the materials you will need to read are available for free on the Internet or will be placed on electronic reserves in the library. There are no course materials you need to purchase, either.

### **Student Assessment and Grading**

Using Google Sites, you will construct a Website in which you will examine, critique and synthesize ideas we explore in the course. One of the pages on your Website will be an opinionated essay, written in the style of an op-ed in a newspaper, where you pivot off of one or more of the major ideas we explore in the course to express your opinion on a topic related to what we cover. Your Website project will commence early in the semester with an annotated bibliography and statement of your preliminary plan for your Website. Please see “Website Project Its Stages and Due Dates” section of the syllabus for the details. At different points in the semester, you will give two separate, ten-minute classroom presentations related to your Website. In your first presentation, you will let the class know your preliminary ideas for your opinionated essay and garner their feedback. In your second presentation, which will be held a few weeks after your first presentation, you will present your then-current draft of your Website to the class. The final draft of the Website will be due on at noon on December 13.

In addition to creating your Website and presenting your progress on it to the class, you will also be required to provide constructive feedback to other students on their Websites after their first drafts of their Websites have been presented to the class.

Your numeric scores on the assessments will be converted to a weighted average overall course score using the following weights:

Annotated Bibliography and Statement of Website Plan	10%
Classroom Presentation on Website Plan	5%

Classroom Presentation of First Draft of Website	5%
Feedback on Other Students' First Drafts of Websites	20%
First Draft of Website	25%
Final Draft of Website (including embedded media)	35%

At the end of the semester, your weighted average course score will be calculated by applying the weights, listed above, to your scores on the assessments. Your weighted average course score will then be converted to a letter grade using the following scale: 93% and higher = A, 90%-92% = A-, 87%-89% = B+, 83%-86% = B, 80%-82% = B-, 77%-79% = C+, 73%-76% = C, 70%-72% = C-, 67%-69% = D+, 63%-66% = D, 60%-62% = D-, and 59% and below = F. This grade scale will be applied strictly to all students and no exceptions or special favors will be granted.

### **Website Project, Its Stages and Due Dates**

The course provides you with an opportunity to immerse yourself in a highly creative endeavor, one that will also give you a presence on the Internet. During the semester, you will steadily build-up a Website that explores in depth the ideas of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, along with critiques of both of their worldviews, from Nietzschean and Heideggerian standpoints. In addition, you will also integrate into your Website an opinionated essay. The choice of topic for your opinionated essay is up to you; however, it must be largely conceptual in character, and it must build on and be related to the concepts and ideas we cover in the course. Again, the choice of topic is yours, just as long as it meets the constraint I just mentioned. (You will need my approval of the topic in advance of your working on it just to make sure that it does.) You will benefit from the constructive advice of other students in the class as you go about creating your Website. They will be providing you with feedback on your work-in-progress after you have completed the preliminary, first draft of your Website.

The Website will contain a great deal of written content, including the opinionated essay you write; however, you will need to go far beyond the written word in this project. You will also be required to embed a podcast or video into your Website. In this embedded media, you will discuss those aspects of your Website project that you think are the most important or original, which would most likely be your opinionated essay. If you choose, you may have another student interview you in the embedded media. In addition, your Website should have an aesthetic appeal, and you will be required to include visual images that enhance the material you are communicating through the Website. An invaluable resource for the aesthetic and communicative aspects of your Website is *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content That Works* by Janice Redish. It is available as an ebook through Swem Library's Website.

The first step in your Website production will be to come up with a statement of Website plan, including an annotated bibliography of potential sources of information and ideas. The statement of Website plan and annotated bibliography is due on Sunday, October 3. Just email it to Professor Greer. Further guidance on this assignment will be posted on the course Website at a later date. Of course, plans often change, and you are not compelled to follow

your preliminary plan laid out in this first assignment. Just make sure that you check off with Professor Greer if you decide to deviate substantially from your original plan.

The second step in your Website project will be a short (ten minute) presentation to the class of your Website plan, focusing primarily on your proposed opinionated essay. Further details on this will be provided well in advance of the date you give your presentation. The presentations on students' Website plans will be held during various class meetings in October. A sign-up sheet for you to choose a specific time and date for your presentation will be circulated later in the semester.

The third step of the Website project will be to craft a preliminary, first draft of your Website. Further details on this stage of the project will be provided later in the semester. The first draft of your Website is due on Sunday, November 1.

The fourth step in the big project will be another short classroom presentation on your first draft of your Website. The parameters and grading rubric for this assignment will be similar to those of your first presentation. The presentations on students' first drafts of Websites will be held during various class periods in November. A sign-up sheet for you to choose a specific time and date for your presentation will be circulated later in the semester.

The fifth step of the Website project will be for you to provide critical and constructive feedback on up to three other students' Websites. Further guidance on this assignment will be posted on the course Website later in the semester. Your written feedback should be posted on Piazza (a wiki-based on-line forum we will be using for the feedback) no later than Friday, December 3.

Finally, you will submit the final version of your Website, which is due at noon on December 13. You are welcome – indeed encouraged – to keep your Website live long after the class ends. For obvious reasons, if you construct your Website well and continue to refine and expand on it, it could open doors for you in the future. The College will host your Website for you without charge while you remain a student here, and possibly for a span of time after you graduate.

### **Late Submission of Website Policy**

If you submit your Website after it is due, there will be no late penalty on the assignment if both of the following conditions are met: (1) You present credible, documented evidence that an unforeseeable, extenuating circumstance beyond your control, e.g., illness, prevented you from submitting the assignment on time. (2) You submit the Website as soon as it is feasible to do so (i.e., no foot-dragging on submitting it). If either of the two conditions is not met, brace yourself for the dreaded "Greer Haircut," i.e., a ten percent deduction on the score for each week or fraction of a week that the assignment is submitted late. For example, if an assignment were due on a Sunday and were submitted at 12:01 a.m. on Monday, and if either of the two aforementioned conditions were not met, then there would be a ten percent deduction on the score. (Hey, one minute isn't much of a fraction of a week, but it is still a fraction, right?)

### **Attendance Policy**

Since the course entails a great deal of interaction among students, it is important that you attend. However, it would be unreasonable to expect you to attend every class meeting. You may miss up to three class meetings without any adverse implications for your course grade, even if there was no event beyond your control that prevented you from coming. You may also miss one more class meeting, beyond these three, without any adverse implications for your course grade, provided that you present credible documented evidence of an uncontrollable circumstance that prevented you from attending that day. Each additional class you miss beyond these 3-4 will result in a one percent deduction in your course grade.

### **Drop/Add Deadline**

If you find that you simply cannot tolerate looking at my bald head and big nose, listening to my creaky, Midwestern-accented voice, and being offended by my obnoxious personality, the deadline for drop/add is September 10. The deadline to withdraw from the course (which I sure hope you do not have to do) is November 1.

### **Policy on Plagiarism**

Although you will be relying on other students' feedback as you produce your Website, it is your own construction. Having another student produce the content of your Website, including the embedded opinionated essay, will be deemed a violation of the College's Honor Code, and cases where this happens will be referred to the Honor Council. So will suspected cases of plagiarism of outside sources on the Website project. Plagiarism comes in two main varieties. One is when a student copies four or more words verbatim from a source without using quotation marks and a citation (footnote, endnote or parenthetical citation). The other is when a student paraphrases from a source without explicitly informing the reader of this. We will discuss the rules regarding proper documentation of sources in more detail during the semester. If you have any questions about proper documentation and citation of sources, please consult with me.

### **Policy on Policy Implementation**

The only fair way to apply policies is to apply them strictly. If there were any wiggle room at all in the implementation of policies, then some students would end-up getting special sweetheart deals that other students do not get. This would not be fair. Policies in this course will be applied fairly. Beware of this.

### **Office and Office Hours**

My office is 464 Chancellors Hall, and I will hold office hours from 1:30 – 2:30 on Mondays and Wednesdays and from 2:30 – 4:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. If you cannot see me during my



regularly scheduled office hours, I will be glad to schedule an appointment with you at a different time. I prefer that students meet with me during my designated office hours, but it is not necessary that they limit themselves to these blocks of time. Normally, when I am in my office, even outside of office hours, I keep my office door open. I do that so that anyone so inclined can walk right on in and chat with me – no need to even knock. The exception to this practice is when I need to concentrate hard and think about something I am working on, in which case I keep my door closed. However, this does not happen very often, since I do not think very often.

### **ADA Accommodation Statement**

William & Mary accommodates students with disabilities in accordance with federal laws and university policy. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a learning, psychiatric, physical, or chronic health diagnosis should contact Student Accessibility Services staff at 757-221-2512 or at [sas@wm.edu](mailto:sas@wm.edu) to determine if accommodations are warranted and to obtain an official letter of accommodation. For more information, please see [www.wm.edu/sas](http://www.wm.edu/sas).

### **Writing Resources Center**

The Writing Resources Center, located on the first floor of Swem Library, is a free service provided to W&M students. Trained consultants offer individual assistance with writing, presentation, and other communication assignments across disciplines and at any stage, from generating ideas to polishing a final product. To make an appointment, visit the WRC webpage [www.wm.edu/wrc](http://www.wm.edu/wrc).

### **Tentative Course Schedule**

<u>Week of</u>	<u>Topic(s) and Reading Assignment (in parentheses)</u>
Aug. 29	1. Introduction to the course. (There are no assigned readings for this week.)
Sept. 5	1. Very general overview of perspectives of Hume, Smith and Marx. (Robert Heilbroner, <i>The Worldly Philosophers</i> , 7 <sup>th</sup> edition, chapters 3 and 6. These chapters are posted on the course Website.)
Sept. 12	1. Very general overview of Nietzsche and Heidegger. 2. David Hume on the limits of reason. (Assigned reading: David Hume, <i>An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature</i> . This reading can be found at <a href="https://people.rit.edu/wlrgsh/Abstract.pdf">https://people.rit.edu/wlrgsh/Abstract.pdf</a> . You should note that Hume published the <i>Abstract</i> as a summary of his much longer work, <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i> . Both works were initially published anonymously, as was common at the time. You will notice that when Hume refers to the author of A

*Treatise of Human Nature*, he uses the third person, even though he is the author.)

Sept. 19 1. The sentimentalist perspective on human nature and morality. 2. David Hume and Adam Smith on human nature and morality. (Assigned Reading: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I, Section I, Chaps. 1, 3-5; Part I, Section II, Introduction, Chap. IV; Part I, Sec. III, Chap. 2. This reading is available for free download at <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed.>)

Sept. 26 1. Adam Smith on economics, or a theory of how the pursuit of self-interest in the context of a competitive market system leads to the social good. (Assigned Reading: Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Chaps 1-3. This book may be downloaded for free at: [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h.htm.](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h.htm))

Oct. 3 1. More on Marx. (Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, chapter 8. This book is available as an ebook on Swem's Website.)

\*The annotated bibliography and statement of Website plan is due on Sunday, Oct. 3.

Oct. 10 Student presentations on Website plans. (There are no assigned readings.)

Oct. 17 Student presentations on Website plans. (There are no assigned readings.)

Oct. 24 1. Student presentations on Website plans. (There are no additional assigned readings for this week.)

Oct. 31 1. Karl Marx on the inexorable collapse of the market system. (Assigned Reading: Daniel Saros, *Principles of Political Economy*, Chap. 4. Available for free download at: [https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/principles-of-political-economy.](https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/principles-of-political-economy))

\*The first draft of your Website is due on November 1.

Nov. 7 1. More on the perspective of Nietzsche. (Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, chapters 6 and 9. This book is available as an ebook on Swem's Website.)

Nov. 14 1. More on the perspective of Heidegger. 2. Student presentations on first drafts of Websites. (Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, chapters 11 and 17. This book is available as an ebook on Swem's Website.)

- Nov. 21      1. Heidegger's critiques of modernity. 2. Student presentations on first drafts of Websites. (Assigned reading: Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Krell. This essay will be posted on the course Website.)
- Nov. 28      1. Student presentations on first drafts of Websites. (No assigned readings.)
- Dec. 5        1. Student presentations on first drafts of Websites. (No assigned readings.)

\*Your written feedback on up to three other students' first drafts of Websites must be posted on Piazza no later than Sunday, December 5.

\*The final draft of your Website is due at noon on December 13.

Professor Greer reserves the right to make minor changes to this syllabus, including changing due dates, should the need to do so arise. All such changes will be announced in advance.