

## SYLLABUS

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# Humanizing economics

Starr King School for the Ministry

3 units

Spring 2017

Wednesday 2:10-5:00pm

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Available by appointment

### Course description

In this class, we will gain facility with modern economic theory in order to engage and deconstruct it in service of personal liberation and social change. Despite the illusion of disembodied objectivity presented by mainstream academics, economics is fundamentally interactive. To that end, we will use an engaged pedagogy with the following components:

- Exercises to explore the dehumanizing dynamics of modern exchange and exploitation, embody counter-oppressive responses, and brainstorm ways to initiate and support alternative paradigms. We will draw on Theater of the Oppressed and Aesthetics of the Oppressed.
- Lectures on basic economic concepts in which the instructor's mainstream training is actively complemented by other participants' perspectives, questions, and wisdom.
- Creative and decolonizing engagement with current events in light of course topics.
- A shared and continuous responsibility to create a supportive and safe environment for sharing individual experiences of scarcity, greed, exploitation, indebtedness, gratitude, abundance, forgiveness, renunciation, sacrifice, generosity, and other relevant experiences.
- Shared experimentation, ritual-building, and reflection for the development of personal and group practices to transform our habitual ways of engaging with the economy, broadly defined.
- Reflections on the course reading, discussion, and activities three times during the semester and written feedback on others' reflections at least three times, totaling six weeks of active participation in mid-week online forum.
- A final project built from previous work. Students will choose one of the following emphases or propose an alternative: economic memoir; essay covering the economic backstory of a topic of the news media; in-depth analysis of their current economic practices.

The class is designed for people who have avoided economics classes and terminology out of aversion or fear and those who are familiar with the concepts and have found them inadequate or spiritually harmful. Others are welcome! At the conclusion of the course, participants will be able to bring their spiritual practices to their economic activity and conversations about the global economy.

## **Grading**

Students are encouraged to opt for written evaluations (i.e. Pass/Fail grading) in accordance with Starr King's orientation towards education to counter oppressions. The various components of course participation are listed below. The instructor will be an active participant and will offer support to groups planning opening rituals (described below).

- 50% attendance and participation in classes
- 10% leadership of at least one ritual
- 10% essays and other reflections on course materials
- 10% constructive feedback on classmates' reflections
- 20% final project, the culmination of previous reflections

## **Opening, closing, and linking class sessions**

Each class session will begin and end with an invitation to touch into the sacred, and together we will spin and weave ritual throughout our gatherings. The readings, online reflective writings, and short in-class lectures on economics serve as context-building for our embodied transformative work, rather than the primary focus of the class.

At the end of each class session, we will all pick a single slogan (examples listed at the end of the syllabus) representing common economic "wisdom" to carry with us throughout the week. The goal is to observe when and how it shows up in our daily lives and current events to become aware of its impact on our own attitudes and behaviors as well as those with whom we interact. Two people will be invited to facilitate an opening ritual at the beginning of the following session to bring us into the class and let go of/transform our old slogan. They may choose readings, prayers, songs, or other shared activities to bring spirit into our work to overcome the oppression embedded in these slogans.

## **Course material**

Our primary text is *Debt: The First 5000 Years* by David Graeber. The remaining required reading will be available on Moodle. The current version of the syllabus will always be available at: <http://tinyurl.com/humanizingeconspring2017>.

The most important readings each week are the reflection pieces posted by classmates online. Each week, one or two students will post their current reflections on course material in order to solicit feedback to incorporate into their final project. During the first two meetings of class, we will determine the schedule for these posts and for colleagues' feedback. Everyone is required to make three primary posts and post feedback three times.

## Topics

Week 1: Utility and the futility of getting what we want

### Questions

- How do economic metaphors pervade our lives, particularly our relationships?
- How do economic metaphors pervade learning? (units, credits, banking method of education, “investing in self”: knowledge as commodity)

### Assignments for next week

- Bring an object to class next week with the following qualities:
  - You appreciate having it in your life, for practical more than sentimental reasons.
  - You can tolerate life without it for the next three months and possibly forever.
  - It would likely bring value to the lives of any of the other participants in the class.
  - It’s relatively non-perishable. (It will still have approximately the same form three months from now.)
- Readings

Week 2: Abundance, scarcity, and gratitude

### Material

- Graeber, David. (2011). *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Chapters 1 & 2, Brooklyn: Melville House, pp. 1-42
- EF Schumacher's seminal essay on “Buddhist Economics.”  
<http://www.centerforneweconomics.org/buddhist-economics>
- Beck, Charlotte Joko. (1993). “The promise that is never kept.” *Nothing Special: Living Zen*. pp. 45-52.
- Cavanaugh, William T. (2008). “Scarcity and abundance.” *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. New York: HarperCollins, pp. 89-100

### Questions

- How does the application of economic concepts and ways of structuring economic systems lead to delusion and suffering? How does their application lead to clarity and the reduction of suffering?
- What are the hazards of living in denial of material reality? What are the limits of material reality? How do we wake up through material reality without getting seduced by it?
- How should we think about desire, both as religious leaders and as organizers for economic justice?

### Assignments for next week

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings
- Visit a pawn shop.

Week 3: The elegance and tyranny of markets

### Material

- Classmates’ reflection papers

- Graeber, *Debt*, Chapters 3 & 4, pp. 43-89
- Eisenstein, Charles. (2011). “The illusion of scarcity” and “Money and the mind.” *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*. Berkeley: Evolve Editions, pp. 19-48

#### *Questions*

- How are economic concepts metaphors for truth?
- What does studying economics do to the mind? How is the academic study of economics a manifestation of white supremacy? Of chauvinism?

#### *Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings (extra important this week!)

#### Week 4: Objectivity and “the god trick”

##### *To be covered in class*

- The invisible hand
- Class activity: constructing comparative knowledges

##### *Material*

- Classmates’ reflection papers
- Hayek, Friedrich August. (1945). “The use of knowledge in society.” *The American Economic Review* 35(4), 519-530.
- Haraway, Donna. (1988). “Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective.” *Feminist studies*, 575-599.
- Shah, Indries. (1994). “Mystical formulas” and “Repeatable experiments.” *The Commanding Self*. London: Octagon Press. pp. 36-39

#### *Questions*

- What's the difference between Haraway’s and Hayek’s understandings of knowledge(s)? Would these authors agree on anything?
- Does Hayek play the “god trick” described by Donna Haraway?
- What are the theological implications of taking an objective approach to studying economic exchange?
- Identify examples of experiments and natural experiments in modern society and/or history that have been used to explain or justify facts or beliefs.

#### *Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings (Please be up-to-date with Graeber's text.)

#### Week 5: Debts, slavery, and ... what else?

##### *Material*

- Classmates’ reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapters 5 & 6
- Hodal, Kate and Chris Kelley. 10 June 2014. “Trafficked into slavery on Thai trawlers to catch food for prawns.” *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jun/10/-sp-migrant-workers-new-life-enslaved-thai-fishing>

### Questions

- Are you empowered when you engage in labor? Consumption? Other economic activity? Do you feel a sense of control? What other powers are at work?
- How has our economic history been perverted? How do we live without denial?

### Assignments for next week

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

## Week 6: Commons and not

### Material

- Classmates' reflection papers
- Lingo, Stephano B., Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark. "Ecological Crisis and the Tragedy of the Commodity."  
[http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/21/ecological-crisis-and-the-tragedy-of-the-commodity/#\\_edn19](http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/21/ecological-crisis-and-the-tragedy-of-the-commodity/#_edn19)
- Federici, Silvia. (2004). Selections from "The Accumulation of Labor and the Degradation of Women Constructing 'Difference' in the 'Transition to Capitalism.'" *Caliban and the Witch*. Brooklyn: Autonmedia, pp. 68-75, 85-97, 103-107.
- Federici, Silvia. (2010). "Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation." *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland: PM Press, pp. 138-148.
- Wydick, Bruce. (2008). Selections from Chapter 4 "Rural Poverty, Economic Development, and the Environment." *Games in Economic Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 49-55, 63-66.

### Questions

- What is the tragedy of the commons? When is(n't) it valid?
- Can you apply Federici's argument about women's bodies as the new commons to the violent appropriation of labor in SE Asian fisheries?

### Assignments for next week

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

## Week 7: Repairing vs. compensating

### Material

- Classmates' reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 7
- Coates, Ta-nehisi. June 2014. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

### Questions

- What are the markets at play in Coates' analysis?
- Can we think about reparations for commons enclosures throughout time?

*Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

Week 8: Gold and God, debt and forgiveness

*Material*

- Classmates' reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 8
- Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics*, "The economics of usury," pp. 93-124
- The Lord's Prayer, including Aramaic translations (versions to be determined)
- Beck, *Nothing Special*, "Forgiveness," pp. 55-56.

*Questions*

- What is currency?
- What does greed feel like and where does it come from in your body? In your history?
- What does forgiveness feel like and where does it come from in your body? In your history?

*Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings
- Midterm evaluation

Week 9: Trust and risk, guarantees and cooperation

*Material*

- Classmates' reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 9
- Wydick, *Games in Economic Development*, Chapter 5 "Risk, Solidarity Networks, and Reciprocity," pp. 67-80.
- Chodron, Pema. (2002). "Comfortable with uncertainty" and "The wisdom of no escape." *Comfortable with Uncertainty*. Boston: Shambala, pp. 5-8

*Questions*

- How have you used money to mitigate or cope with uncertainty in your life?
- How does community support itself through uncertainty?

*Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

Week 10: Separation, segmentation, and discrimination

*Material*

- Classmates' reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 10, pp. 251-306.
- Schelling, Thomas. (1978, 2006 edition). "Sorting and mixing: Race and sex." *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 135-166
- Miserandino, Christine. (2003). "The Spoon Theory," <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>

- Clare, Eli. (1999, 2009). “the mountain.” *exile and pride: disability, queerness and liberation*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, pp. 1-14.

*Questions*

- Where is the ethical breakdown in a system where discrimination increases profits? How can we respond?
- What is the difference between discrimination and discernment?
- How is disability treated in a capitalist society?

*Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

Week 11: Climate disruption economics

*Material*

- Classmates’ reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 11
- Rasmussen, Larry A. (2013). The World We Have. *Earth Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. New York: Oxford, pp. 43-79.
- Broome, John. (2008). The ethics of climate change. *Scientific American*, 298(6), 96-102.

*Questions*

- Return to our definitions of externalities and public goods. How can climate disruption be described in these terms? What is lost by using only this terminology?
- Climate change is a “sexy” topic for young economists to study these days, which means it is in competition with other topics. How does a focus on climate disruption distract us from other social justice initiatives? How does it intersect?
- Must we (as in those of us meeting in this class) change our relationship to nature-culture? How can we tell whether our actions are harmful or not yet positively influential?

*Assignments for next week*

- Reflections or responses, if you signed up for next week
- Readings

Weeks 12-13: To be determined

*Potential topics*

- Redistributing the objects we brought at the beginning of the semester
- Local currencies
- Gentrification
- ?

*Material*

- Classmates’ reflection papers
- Graeber, *Debt*, chapter 12
- Others to be determined

## Slogans

As described above, these slogans will be transformed through our opening and closing rituals and our work throughout week. Additional slogans week be added through course discussion.

- No pain, no gain
- There's no such thing as a free lunch
- Not worth my time
- Worth its salt
- Worth its weight in gold
- Beggars can't be choosers
- Put your money where your mouth is
- Talk is cheap
- Time is money
- A rising tide lifts all boats
- The poor will always be with us
- You don't owe anything to anybody
- Making a deal with the devil
- Getting something for nothing