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**Capitalism and its Critics**

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POLS BC3048  
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Wednesday 11:00-12:50  
306 Milbank Hall



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**Course description**

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Capitalism is usually thought of as an economic system, but what does it have to do with politics? This course examines how thinkers of contrasting perspectives have understood capitalism politically. Some have celebrated the market as an escape from coercion, while others criticize it as a source of disguised domination; some see capitalism as a leveler of social hierarchies, while others point to its creation of class and racial hierarchy; some see capitalism as an engine of wealth creation and heightened living standards, while others emphasize its destruction of existing ways of life and production of inequality; some see capitalism as a guarantor of peace, while others emphasize its reliance on violence. In particular, we will consider the relationship between state and market; moral critiques of markets and exchange; analyses of the role of force and violence in accumulation; and theories of freedom and domination.

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**Student learning outcomes**

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By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of how capitalism has been theorized by its defenders and critics.
- Analyze and interpret capitalism as a distinctively political phenomenon.
- Critically assess relevant theoretical frameworks and policy measures including, but not limited to, those dealing with economic issues.
- Clearly and persuasively express and defend ideas in writing and speech, with reference to both textual argument and original analysis.
- Independently research and write a substantial and original research paper.

## Course requirements, expectations, and guidelines

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### *Assignments and grading*

Your grade in this course will be based on three main criteria: class participation, a short essay, and a research paper, as outlined below.

1. Class participation 20%
  - a. Contributions to discussion 5%
  - b. Leading discussion 5%
  - c. Discussion questions 10%
2. Short essay (4-5 pages), due **March 6**: 25%
3. Research paper, 55%
  - a. Topic proposal (~1 page), due **February 7**: 5%
  - b. Research outline: (3-4 pages), due **February 28**: 10%
  - c. Draft and writer's memo (1-2 pages): due **March 27**: 5%
  - d. Peer feedback, due **April 10**: 5%
  - e. Final draft (15-20 pages) and revision statement (1-2 pages): due **May 1**: 30%

You may take an extension of **up to 48 hours on any one assignment, to be used at your discretion**. You do not need to request this extension in advance, but please write EXTENSION at the top of the page. Other late work will be penalized by 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late. If there are extenuating circumstances for which you require a longer extension, please speak to me.

Logistical but important: **please include your name both in the document and in the saved title** (e.g. Battistoni—Topic Proposal). It will make it much easier for me to keep track of your work!

### *Academic Integrity and Generative AI*

Learning is always a collective process, and recognizing what we have learned from others is a core academic practice, as reflected in Barnard's Honor Code (below). Plagiarism, use of others' work without appropriate citation, reuse of one's own material, and other forms of concealing the sources of one's ideas and work are serious academic offenses.

This includes the use of generative AI tools and large learning models like ChatGPT. As you are surely aware, these tools have been the subject of a great deal of academic discussion. Like many other faculty members, I am concerned about the potential effects of ChatGPT use on the development of students' reading, writing, and research abilities. Using ChatGPT to write papers and develop ideas is a waste of both your time and mine: I am interested in what you have to say, not what ChatGPT aggregates from other people's thoughts, and I hope you are too.

That said, organizing assignments and assessments entirely around the aim of blocking your use of ChatGPT or catching you in the act seems to me to be both undesirable and futile. I am here to help you learn, not to discipline you. You may use ChatGPT in early stages of research and compiling sources—although you should always cite it when you do so, and you should be aware that ChatGPT is prone to errors. You should not use it to generate the written material that you submit for your discussion questions, papers, or other assignments. If I do find that you have used

ChatGPT to generate writing assignments submitted as your own work, I will treat it as the case of plagiarism that it is. Please ask questions if you are confused about what is permitted.

## Participation

### *In-class participation: Attendance, preparation, and conduct*

As an upper-level seminar, this is a reading-intensive course: we will be reading approximately 100-125 pages per week, sometimes a bit more or less. You should come to class having completed the assigned readings and should be prepared to discuss them. We will often look closely at particular passages in class, and you should be prepared to reference specific parts of the text, so please bring a copy of the assigned reading with you.

The point of colloquia is to work through complicated ideas together and develop our own ideas in conversation—whether by helping one another to understand difficult arguments, considering the different possible interpretations of the same text, or debating the various political conclusions one might draw from it. I expect everyone in section to listen to each other respectfully and engage thoughtfully with one another's ideas, even—indeed especially—when you disagree. Your participation grade will be based on your engagement with the texts and with your classmates, which means that it will reflect listening as well as speaking.

Because the success of a colloquium depends on participation, **attendance in class meetings is mandatory**. You can miss one class meeting for any reason without it affecting your participation grade; you do not need to tell me why. If you need to miss additional classes, please be in touch.

### *Discussion questions*

Each week before class, please post **three questions or points for discussion** concerning the week's readings to the relevant discussions tab in Courseworks. These are due **by 8am the morning of class**, so that we can read them in advance; posts submitted after 8am (give or take a few minutes) will not count. They should be both substantive and substantial; they may raise questions about the assigned reading, critique an author's analysis, or raise an issue or theme that you found to be particularly interesting. Where relevant, they should include citations to the texts in question so we can all locate the passage or phrase in question. I will use these questions to help structure our discussion. I expect them to show thought and care; if I am consistently concerned about the quality of your questions I may ask you to revise them. **You do not need to submit discussion questions the week that you are a discussion leader, and you may skip two weeks at your discretion.**

### *Leading discussion*

Once in the course of the semester, you will be responsible for leading discussion **by giving a ~10 minute presentation about the week's readings and key themes**. This presentation should include:

- Identify **one passage** from an assigned text that you would like us to look at
- **Write a short response (~350 words)** undertaking a close reading of the passage and explaining why you chose it for us to focus on: what idea does it illustrate? How does it

operate in the text more broadly? How does it connect or illuminate other readings from this week, or ideas we have discussed in the course more broadly?

- Identify **2-3 substantive discussion questions** (these should follow similar principles to your usual discussion questions) for the class to address

Please post this assignment to Courseworks **by 5pm the evening before class (i.e., 5pm Tuesday evening)**, so that other students can review it before class. I will generally begin class by giving an overview of the readings, their authors, and their context, then turn it over to the discussion leader. **In class, you will give a short (~5-10 minute) presentation discussing your passage and analysis in the context of key themes (*not* summarizing the readings) and sharing your discussion questions.**

### *Laptop policy*

In my experience, laptops tend to inhibit our ability to engage with others in the same room, and often prove distracting both to their users and to others. Recent studies also suggest that the use of laptops to take notes has a negative impact on students' grades. Regardless of intent, it is very difficult to avoid looking at a screen when it is in front of you. While I have made course readings available via Courseworks in the interest of accessibility, I strongly urge you to print out the readings or use a tablet to access them. Please do not use your cell phones in class.

### **Short paper**

There is one short paper for this course, due March 6, which is designed to help you think through course themes on a topic related to your final essay. We will discuss your short essay topic in a meeting about your research outline (see below), but you should plan to focus it on a single text or idea. **This essay should be 4-5 pages, and should make a clear and original argument that is supported with textual evidence from the relevant material.** This paper is intended to develop your skills as close readers, interpreters, and critics of texts; as such it should creatively interpret and engage with the assigned readings. It is also intended to help you ground your final research paper in course material. As such, you can use some material from your short essay in the final paper, though you should not reuse the *entire* paper.

### **Research paper**

The major project of this course is a research paper, which you will develop over the course of the semester. You are free to choose a paper topic of personal interest that addresses the themes, ideas, and concepts addressed in the course. The paper does not have to synthesize all course material, but it should reflect an engagement with the subject matter and themes we have addressed throughout the course. The essays you produce should be both analytical and argumentative in nature, not simply descriptive or factual. While we will discuss the process of building an argument over the course of the semester, getting from a topic to an argument requires steady work. With that in mind, you'll be responsible for a series of assignments along the way to help you set up your papers and craft your arguments, with the aim of helping you make steady progress throughout the semester. **Each component should be submitted before the beginning of class on the due date.**

- a. *Topic statement*, due **February 7**: A 2-3 paragraph (~250-300 words) statement outlining the topic you plan to research, what interests you about it, what you already know, and what you would like to learn. Think through some of the questions you will need to answer in order to write an effective, informative, and analytical essay on this topic – you can list these in bullet points if you want—and spend a sentence or two describing the kinds of evidence and sources you anticipate using (e.g. historical material, legal cases).

I realize that this assignment comes early in the course—your topic can change, but it will help to start thinking about it sooner than later.

- b. *Research outline*, due **February 21**: Your outline should present **the research question** that your paper will answer, explaining the problem your paper will investigate, the stakes of answering it, and the way that you plan to approach your argument. You should also include **a list of 6-8 sources with short annotations** situating your question within the relevant scholarly literature and explaining how you expect each source will contribute to your paper. These sources **should constitute a preliminary literature review**, showing that you have familiarized yourself with core research on your question. They should *not* be news articles or articles selected at random. This is where you learn what other scholars have said about your topic and think about where your own ideas fall within existing debates.

You should make an appointment to discuss your research outline with me in Week 6 or 7. I also recommend meeting with Jennie Correia, Barnard's research librarian for the social sciences: <https://library.barnard.edu/profiles/jennie-correia>

- c. *Rough draft*, due **March 27**: No one does their best work in the first draft: good papers are revised papers. To begin the writing process early enough to revise your work, you will be responsible for **a draft of the first ~10 pages of your paper**, followed by an outline of the remaining sections. This draft does not need to be perfect, and it is obviously not expected to be complete, but it should be written as a paper rather than an extended outline (e.g. full paragraphs rather than bullet points; a clear introduction and thesis; etc.). It should clearly situate your own argument within the literature you have identified in your research outline. I will provide comments on the draft and your plans for completion within one week of receipt to help guide your revision. **You will also be responsible for reading another student's paper and giving peer feedback**; we will review the guidelines for peer feedback in class.

*Writer's memo*: Along with your draft, you should submit a 1-2 page memo addressing the following issues:

- A short discussion of your writing process thus far: have you changed your mind about anything as you conducted research?
- One or two elements you see as strengths of the draft thus far.
- One or two things you would like to improve.
- Anything you are struggling with or would like particular feedback on.

*Peer feedback*: Feedback from peers is another crucial part of the writing process. I will assign writing peers, and you will share your drafts with one another and provide comments (we will discuss the parameters for peer review in class). Your comments should be constructive

and respectful. **Peer feedback is due two weeks after draft papers (April 10).** We will reserve some time to discuss feedback in class.

Your draft should be formatted in 12 point, Times New Roman font, and double spaced, with 1-inch margins. Please submit your draft as a Word document (or Google doc) so I can easily comment on it.

- d. *Final paper, due May 1: Final draft of the paper, 15-20 pages, and 1-2 page revision statement.* You do not need to incorporate or accept all of my suggestions for revision, nor those of your peer reviewer—this is your paper, and your argument, and you may disagree with other people’s feedback. It should reflect an engagement with those comments, however. To this end, your paper should be accompanied by a 1-2 page statement explaining how you revised your paper from the rough draft, why you made the changes you did, and whether and how you responded to comments. (If you chose not to adopt certain suggestions, you can say why.)

#### *Office hours & communication*

I will hold office hours weekly on **Thursdays from 2-4 pm in my office at 1115 Milstein, or via Zoom.** Office hours will be in person by default; if you want to meet by Zoom you must let me know! You can book a slot in advance at <https://calendly.com/alyssabattistoni>, but you should also feel free to stop by without an appointment. If you are unavailable to meet during office hours, please email me to make an appointment and propose at least three possible alternate times for ease of scheduling. Meetings outside of my normal office hours are more likely to be held on Zoom.

You can come to office hours to discuss anything related to the course—a difficult passage from a text, an idea for a paper, questions about my comments on a draft, confusion about an assignment, concerns about your performance. College policies regarding academic honesty, accessibility and disability accommodations, affordable texts, and other issues are listed below, but you should feel free to speak to me about more specific concerns.

You can email me at any time at my Barnard email address ([abattist@barnard.edu](mailto:abattist@barnard.edu)), and during the week, I will generally respond within twenty-four hours. (I may be slower to respond on weekends, so please try to avoid making urgent requests on Saturday evenings!) If you email me and don’t hear back, please don’t hesitate to follow up—I will appreciate the reminder. If you have a substantive question (e.g., “what does Hobbes mean by the artificial person of the state?”), please stop by office hours or make an appointment to talk in person. If you have a logistical question, check the syllabus first, and email me if you can’t find the answer. I will contact you via your college email address, so please make sure to check it regularly.

#### *Other resources*

The course assignments are designed to give you regular practice and feedback on your writing and speaking skills over the course of the semester, and I encourage you to speak with me if there are any particular aspects of these skills that you are struggling with or hoping to improve. However, Barnard also offers many other resources to support you in developing these skills. In particular, **I strongly encourage you to consider working with the Writing Fellows and Speaking Fellows**

at the Erica Mann Jong '63 Writing Center, which you can learn more about here:

<https://writing.barnard.edu/>

**Research support:** Jennie Correia serves as Research and Instruction Librarian for the Social Sciences, and is available for research consultations here:

<https://library.barnard.edu/profiles/jennie-correia>

## College Policies

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### Honor Code

*Approved by the student body in 1912 and updated in 2016, the Code states:*

We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.

### Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services (CARDS) Statement

If you believe you may encounter barriers to the academic environment due to a documented disability or emerging health challenges, please feel free to contact me and/or the Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services (CARDS): (212) 854-4634, [cards@barnard.edu](mailto:cards@barnard.edu), or learn more at [barnard.edu/disabilityservices](http://barnard.edu/disabilityservices). CARDS is located in 101 Altschul Hall.

### Wellness Statement

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself--your own health, sanity, and wellness—your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

- <http://barnard.edu/primarycare>
- <https://barnard.edu/about-counseling>
- <http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>
- Stressbusters Support Network

### Affordable Access to Course Texts & Materials Statement

All students deserve to be able to study and make use of course texts and materials regardless of cost. Barnard librarians have partnered with students, faculty, and staff to find ways to increase student access to textbooks. By the first day of advance registration for each term, faculty will have provided information about required texts for each course on CourseWorks (including ISBN or author, title, publisher, copyright date, and price), which can be viewed by students. A number of cost-free or low-cost methods for accessing some types of course texts are detailed on the Barnard Library **Course Materials** guide (<https://library.barnard.edu/find-borrow/course-materials>).

Undergraduate students who identify as first-generation and/or low-income students may check out items from the **FLI Partnership Libraries** in the Barnard Library (<https://library.barnard.edu/find-borrow/FLIpartnership>) and in Butler Library for an entire semester. Students may also consult with their professors, the Dean of Studies, and the Financial Aid Office about additional affordable alternatives for having access to course texts. Visit the guide and talk with your professors and your librarian for more details.

## Readings

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*Required texts:* The required texts for this course are available as ebooks via the Columbia/Barnard library system. However, I strongly encourage you to purchase them in hard copy if you are able: these are classic texts in inexpensive editions, and they will be useful to you as references not only throughout the course but in future work in political theory.

- Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Modern Library 2000).
    - Available as ebook: <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio14200722>
    - NOTE: If you are purchasing this volume, please note that it does not immediately show up on Amazon! You can use the ISBN number for easy searching:  
ISBN 10: 0679783369
  - Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin Classics 1990)\*
    - Available as ebook: <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio14040359>
- \*NOTE: *Capital* is a notoriously dense and challenging text. While we will take time to discuss it in depth in class, you may find it useful to use a guide in reading for class—even if you have read *Capital* before. I recommend in particular Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. David Harvey's *Companion to Marx's Capital* is also an excellent resource. I will make both available via Courseworks.

All other readings will be made available via Courseworks.

In addition to the assigned readings, some more general reference texts may be useful—see my note on *Capital* above. A few useful texts:

- Geoff Mann, *Disassembly Required: A Field Guide to Actually Existing Capitalism* (AK Press 2013)
- Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism* (Polity 2008)
- Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Polity 2018)
- Jürgen Kocka, *Capitalism: A Short History* (Princeton 2016)

FYI: All of Marx's writings and many other texts about capitalism—including many of Adam Smith's—are freely available online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org), though the formatting leaves something to be desired. Liberty Fund ([www.libertyfund.org](http://www.libertyfund.org)) also provides many classic works of political economy as free digital resources and inexpensive hard copies.



## Course schedule and reading list

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### Week 1 (January 17): Introduction (no reading)

### Week 2 (January 24): What is capitalism, and what (if anything) is wrong with it?

- Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Polity 2018), Chapter 1, “Conceptualizing Capitalism,” and Chapter 3, “Criticizing Capitalism”
- Michael Sonenscher, *Capitalism: The Story behind the Word* (Princeton 2022), Ch 3, “Capitalism and the History of Political Thought”

### Week 3 (Jan 31): Do markets bring peace and prosperity?

- Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Introduction, Book I, Ch 2-4, Book IV, Ch 2.
- Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Part IV, Book 20, Ch 1: “Of Commerce,” Ch 2: “Of the Spirit of Commerce”
- Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” First Supplement (1795)
- Onur Ulas Ince, “Between Equal Rights: Primitive Accumulation and Capital’s Violence,” *Political Theory* (2017)

### Week 4 (February 7): Do markets corrupt our morals?

#### Research topic proposal due

- Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Ch 1.1-1.3, “The Commodity”
- Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Ch 3: “Of the Corruption of Our Moral Sentiments”
- Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), Ch. 6, 14, 15
- Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale* (2010), Ch 5: “Markets in Women’s Reproductive Labor”

### Week 5 (Feb 14): Do markets make us free?

- Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (1980), Chapter 1
- Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, & Utopia* (1974), Chapter 7.1, 8 (excerpts)
- G.A. Cohen, “Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism” (1981)
- G.A. Cohen, “Freedom and Money” (1995)

### Week 6 (February 21): Is capitalist labor free?

#### Research outline due; schedule meeting with Prof Battistoni this week or next

- Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Ch 1, “The Division of Labor”; Ch 5, “Of the real and nominal Price of Commodities, or of their Price in Labour, and their Price in Money” (excerpts)
- Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol 1. [1870] (Penguin), Ch. 6, “The Sale and Purchase of Labor Power”
- Friedrich Hayek, “Employment and Independence,” *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)
- Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton 2017), Ch. 2, pp. 37-71

### Week 7 (February 28): Does capitalism generate class conflict?

- Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Ch 8 (“Wages of Labour”)
- G.W.F. Hegel, “Lordship and Bondage,” *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), 111-18
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Bourgeois & Proletarians,” *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

- Karl Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 10, “The Working Day,” Parts I-IV
- Alex Gourevitch, “Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work,” *Political Theory* (2013)

### **Week 8 (March 6): Does capitalism need racial and gender division?**

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), Ch 1-2: “The Black Worker”; “The White Worker”
- Vanessa Wills, “What Could it Mean to say Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?” *Philosophical Topics* (2018)
- Cinzia Arruzza, “Remarks on Gender,” *Viewpoint* (2014)
- Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), “Capitalism and Discrimination”

*Spring break!*

### **Week 9 (March 20): Does capitalism distort our relationships?**

#### **Short paper due**

- Karl Marx, *Capital*, Ch 1.4, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”
- Leonard Reed, “I, Pencil” (1958)
- Georg Lukacs, *History & Class Consciousness* (1923), “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” excerpts
- William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno* (2016), “Fetishism & Domination,” p. 82-94.

### **Week 10 (March 27): Does capitalism distort our consciousness?**

- Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Introduction, Ch 3, “The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation”
- Louis Althusser, “On Ideology,” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* ([1970] 2013)
- Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Toward a Marxism Without Guarantees” (1983)

### **Week 11 (April 3): Does capitalism need the state?**

#### **Rough draft and writer’s memo due**

- Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book V.i.a-d, “Of the Expenses of the Sovereign or Commonwealth”
- Milton Friedman, *Capitalism & Freedom* (1962), Ch 1, “The Relation Between Economic Freedom and Political Freedom”; Chapter 2, “The Role of Government in a Free Society”
- Louis Althusser, “The State,” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*
- London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State* (1979), Chapters 2-3.

### **Week 12 (April 10): Are capitalism and democracy compatible?**

- Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” (1989)
- Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (2015), Ch 1, 3
- Nancy Fraser, “Legitimation Crisis? On the Political Contradictions of Financialized Capitalism,” *Critical Historical Studies* (2015)

**Week 13 (April 17): What is the future of capitalism?**

**Peer feedback due: In-class workshop**

- J.M. Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” (1930) *Essays in Persuasion*
- Mike Davis, “Who Will Build the Ark?” *New Left Review* (2010)
- TBD based on class interests

**Week 14 (April 24): Class presentations & concluding discussion**

**Final papers due May 1, midnight**