

# **POLS 010M: The Future of Work: Political Theory in the Age of Robots**

*Jonny Thakkar*

**Fall 2017  
Mondays 1:15-4:00  
Trotter 315**

**Office Hours: Mondays 4:00-6:00 in Trotter 319  
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## **Course Description**

Artificial intelligence seems likely to transform the way we live. Once self-driving cars arrive, for instance, those who currently drive trucks or taxis might well lose their jobs. Automation seems likely to have similar effects on many professions, from manufacturing to medicine. It is never easy to predict the future, but it does seem possible that we are entering an era of mass unemployment. How should societies respond to this threat? Should the state intervene to prevent automation, for example, or provide some kind of universal basic income? Such questions are currently being debated by think tanks and governments around the world, with various pilot schemes already underway. Rather than discussing specific policy proposals, this course will focus on the underlying philosophical issues. Topics will include the role of work in a good life; the relationship between the division of labour and social solidarity; and the nature of exploitation. Readings will range from the philosophical to the sociological and from the classic to the contemporary. As such, the course will provide a window into different styles of political theory.

## **Course Objectives**

As a freshman seminar, this course aims to introduce you to the rigors and pleasures of intense discussion classes. That means honing your skills as readers, writers and speakers. As readers, we will practice close reading of specific passages in order to develop our analytical skills, getting better at finding argumentative structures and becoming more sensitive to literary and rhetorical art. As writers, we will develop our ability to produce challenging, coherent and persuasive arguments, learning when and how to deploy evidence in support of our claims, how best to deal with counter-arguments, and so on. As speakers, we will work on becoming more articulate and considerate conversation partners. The ideal of a discussion class is that everyone makes their points clearly and concisely and with genuine attention to what others have said. This requires taking notes as the discussion proceeds, and being willing to intervene if it seems that one class member is misunderstanding another. It also requires active participation by all. Some will have to make a special effort to get over their shyness; others will have to restrain themselves to make room for others to speak.

## **Course Evaluation**

Class Participation	20%
Three Short Papers (1000 words)	30%
One Longer Paper (8-10 pages)	50%

## **Course Requirements**

This is a discussion seminar whose success depends on the collective work of its members. Attendance at each class is therefore required of all students. You should arrive at class having read and annotated the material, ready to ask at least one clearly formulated question and point to at least one problematic passage if called upon. Please refrain from using mobile phones, computers and other gadgets during class. If you have any questions or concerns about the way class is being conducted, or if you would like to discuss the material further, please come to my office hours. Finally, please note that students found to have plagiarized work or otherwise cheated will fail the course. If you have any doubt as to what constitutes academic misconduct, please check with me or consult the College's guidelines.

## **Three Short Papers**

To facilitate class participation, we will use online discussion boards to prepare. The class will be divided into four groups (A, B, C, D). Each week every member of one group (e.g. A) will write a short essay (around 1000 words) on a particular passage from the reading that they find particularly interesting or challenging. For example, the passage might seem to:

- contain a bad argument
- contradict an earlier passage
- undermine our usual assumptions
- deploy a surprising rhetorical strategy

Your aim should be to introduce a question that we can discuss in class. You therefore need to show why the question is worth spending time thinking about: it should be important and controversial. To show that it is important, you need to explain what is at stake for our understanding of the text or the underlying issue. To show that it is controversial, you need to outline a couple of competing answers that could plausibly be held by reasonably intelligent people in possession of the relevant facts. The main constraint is that your observations be both backed up by evidence and good for stimulating discussion—they shouldn't be obvious to someone who has read the text casually.

These posts should be up on Moodle by 7pm on Saturday evening. At that point members of the second group (e.g. B) will read the posts and write a paragraph in response to any one of them, regardless of whether it has already received a response. (In fact, you can also respond to a response.) Responses should critically evaluate the claims made by the earlier post, either building upon or disagreeing with it. These responses should be up on Moodle by 7pm on Sunday evening. If the discussion continues after that point then all well and good, but there is no obligation. Needless to say, this scheme will require discipline and diligence on the part of each student. But it will make for much better discussions in class.

## **One Longer Paper**

Anything you can do to improve your writing as freshmen will benefit you for the rest of your college careers and beyond. The three short papers will help with this, and after the first round we will have an in-class discussion of writing technique. But the culmination will be a

longer paper of 8-10 pages. Since good writing requires rewriting, this paper will be the subject of drafting and redrafting. This is best done collaboratively. Once the first drafts have been submitted, each student will be assigned the task of coming up with a paragraph of comments and suggestions for a peer. This process should benefit the commenter as well as the author, since learning to evaluate and improve others' work can teach one to do the same for oneself.

The first paper will be due at on October 13<sup>th</sup>. The draft of the second paper will be due on December 11<sup>th</sup> (emailed to the commenter but cc-ed to me); comments will be due on December 12<sup>th</sup> (emailed to the author but cc-ed to me); and then final versions will be submitted to me *in paper form* on December 12<sup>th</sup>. All deadlines are at 12pm.

Due to the nature of the assignments in this course, late work will not be accepted unless there is documentary evidence of an emergency or prior arrangements have been made due to exceptional circumstances. Please note that foreseeable workload crises due to midterms, sporting competitions, theatrical productions and so on do not count as exceptional circumstances at Swarthmore.

### **Disability Accommodations**

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (Parrish 113W) or email [studentdisabilityservices@swarthmore.edu](mailto:studentdisabilityservices@swarthmore.edu) to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. As appropriate, the Office will issue students with documented disabilities a formal Accommodations Letter. Since accommodations require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services as soon as possible. For details about the accommodations process, visit the Student Disability Service Website at <http://www.swarthmore.edu/academic-advising-support/welcome-to-student-disability-service>. You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs. However, all disability-related accommodations must be arranged through the Office of Student Disability Services.

### **Required Books**

Please bring a physical copy of the relevant readings to each class. Some readings (marked on the schedule with an asterisk) will be uploaded to Moodle, but most will be found in books. If at all possible, please buy the editions listed below. The College Bookstore should have them in stock.

Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*, Basic Books (ISBN 0465097537)

Robert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, W.W. Norton (ISBN 039309040X)

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge (ISBN 041525406X)

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, (ISBN 0226025985)

Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, Verso (ISBN 1781688133)

Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society*, Harvard University Press (ISBN 9780674052284)

Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, Harvard University Press (ISBN 0300151195)

## Schedule

### Part One: A Future Without Work?

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9/4	Martin Ford, <i>Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future</i> , chs. 1-5; 7-8, 10	
9/11	J. M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren"* Peter Frase, <i>Four Futures: Life After Capitalism</i> , chs. 1-4	(A&B)
9/18	Philippe Van Parijs & Yannick Vanderborght, <i>Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society</i> , focus on chs. 1-2 and then skim chs. 3 & 4	(C&D)
9/25	Philippe Van Parijs & Yannick Vanderborght, <i>Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society</i> , focus on ch. 5 and then skim chs. 6-8	(B&A)
10/2	Dean Baker, "The Job-Killing-Robot Myth"* Philip Harvey, "Back to Work: A Public Jobs Proposal For Economic Recovery"* Avishai Margalit, "Unemployment" Joan Tronto, <i>Who Cares? How To Reshape a Democratic Politics</i> *	(D&C)
10/9	CLASS TO BE RESCHEDULED FOR AFTER FALL BREAK	

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### FALL BREAK

### Part Two: Classic Reflections on Work

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10/23	Aristotle, <i>History of Animals</i> , I.1, VIII.1* Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> I.1-4, VI.4-5, IX.7* Aristotle, <i>Politics</i> , Book One*	(A&B)
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<b>10/30</b>	Adam Smith, <i>The Wealth of Nations</i> , I.1-3 and V.1.174-189 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology” (MER 147-175; 189-200) Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (MER 473-491)	<b>(C&amp;D)</b>
<b>11/6</b>	Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” (MER 70-101) Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital” (MER 203-217)	<b>(B&amp;A)</b>
<b>11/13</b>	Max Weber, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>	<b>(D&amp;C)</b>
<b>11/20</b>	Hannah Arendt, <i>The Human Condition</i> , Sections 11-31, 42-45	<b>(A&amp;B)</b>
<b>11/27</b>	Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union”* Ann Ferguson & Nancy Folbre, “The Unhappy Marriage of Patriarchy and Capitalism”* Sybil Schwarzenbach, “On Civic Friendship”*	<b>(C&amp;D)</b>
<b>12/4</b>	John Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic”* William Morris, “Useful Work <i>versus</i> Useless Toil”* Richard Sennett, <i>The Craftsman</i> , chs. 1-4	<b>(B&amp;A)</b>
<b>TBD</b>	Richard Sennett, <i>The Craftsman</i> , chs. 5-10	<b>(D&amp;C)</b>
<b>12/11</b>	<b>DRAFT DUE (EMAIL)</b>	
<b>12/12</b>	<b>COMMENTS DUE (EMAIL)</b>	
<b>12/14</b>	<b>FINAL VERSION DUE (TROTTER 308)</b>	