

Introducing Economics Students to Marxist Political Economy: Mental and Physical Health in the Workplace

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Abstract

Introducing economics students to Marxist political economy (MPE) can be a challenging endeavor, especially as there is often limited space in the curriculum. Given this constraint, it can be difficult to know where to start and how to best do justice to the complexity and depth of Marx's work. Students can find MPE daunting, approach the topic with a range of preconceptions, and find it hard to see the immediate relevance. This case study of our teaching practice illustrates how we have approached this issue by introducing students to MPE with an application to physical and mental health in the workplace. By starting with students' own experiences of work, we help them unpack how and why the workplace is structured in the way it is. Initial discussions about the workplace, including about situations in which students have tried to avoid doing work, enable some initial theoretical categories to be developed, such as the distinction between labor and labor power, as well as other observations about how their workplaces are organized to extract labor from them, and the unequal rewards from the output of the work that they do. This provides a way into a more formal theoretical presentation of MPE, but one that is rooted in the lived experience of students. We then look at the implications and effects that the labor process has on physical and mental health (which Marx documents in *Capital* volume I) using case studies from across the globe, including Amazon warehouse workers in the United States and United Kingdom, and textile workers in India. By teaching MPE in this way, we aim to demonstrate how the logic of capitalism imposes itself on the workplace and shapes daily life, and we hope this can inspire students to explore Marx's work further.

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Keywords

Marxian economics, public health, employment, pedagogy, alienation, Marxist political economy

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I. Introduction

In 2024, with the world in a state of polycrisis, characterized by overlapping crises ranging from environmental destruction, the spreading of zoonotic diseases, imperial wars, and rampant socio-economic inequality (Callinicos 2023; Tooze 2021), teaching Marxist political economy (MPE) is vitally necessary. Moreover, as proponents of a pluralist economics education, we deem it important to include the teaching of MPE in our programs.

However, introducing economics students to MPE can be a challenging endeavor for several reasons. First, few economics courses accord adequate time and space for its teaching in their curricula. Across most universities, preparing economics students for their professional careers involves the teaching of core micro- and macroeconomic theories, mostly rooted in neoclassical economics, alongside econometrical and statistical skills, leaving little space for alternative economic perspectives (Jatteau and Egerer 2022; Wigstrom 2016). Such a focus on mainstream economic theories and econometrics persists even though the inapplicability of neoclassical economics to real-world phenomena has been met with students' disdain. Following the Global Financial Crisis, for example, economics student groups across the globe jointly publish an open letter calling for more pluralism of theories, methods, and methodologies to be taught in their economics courses (International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics 2014). Yet, while a more pluralist economics curriculum may be desired, there appears to be a particular reluctance when it comes to the study of MPE. In 2020, the UK Department for Education issued guidance to schools that they are not legally permitted to teach theories and views that aim to "abolish or overthrow. . . capitalism" (Busby 2020).

A second challenge is that students are acutely aware that the skills and theories they learn need to help them secure jobs after their studies. While they may be keen to be exposed to different economic (and social science) perspectives, most banking and financial sector jobs list mathematical modeling skills as their paramount requirement, while economic policy jobs that require knowledge of mainstream theories still dominate policymaking.¹

Third, students can find MPE daunting since Marx is often deemed to be unreadable and his writings associated with additional effort, requiring the reading of accompanying text alongside translated original texts, or the joining of a reading group (McQueen 2005). As a consequence, the complexity and analytical depth of Marx's work appears to sometimes serve as a deterrent to students to wanting to engage with his ideas at all.

Fourth and last, students may approach Marxist economic theory with a range of negative preconceptions. The entrenched nature of capitalism in our societies and the misconception that socialism is to be equated with state-capitalist nations such as the former Soviet Union, China, or Cuba, and is thus not fit-for-purpose in any shape or form, make it even more challenging to enthrone students to engage with MPE.

Given these constraints, it can be difficult to know where to start with teaching MPE and how to best do justice to the complexity and depth of Marx's work. This case study of our teaching practice illustrates how we have approached this issue. In the following sections, we outline a concrete proposal of how MPE can be integrated into tight economics curricula, by engaging students in classroom discussions around mental and physical health in the workplace. By doing so, we allow students to draw from their own experiences at work while providing an explanation for why feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation in the workplace are widespread.

¹To give one example, during the 2022–2023 cost of living crisis across the Global North, most major central banks insisted on the application of New-Keynesian monetary policies that focus on inflation-targeting, despite major ongoing debates relating to their usefulness in response to the supply shortages experienced after the COVID-19 pandemic (Weber and Wasner 2023).

2. Why Focus on Mental and Physical Health in the Workplace?

There are three crucial, interrelated reasons for why we deem that the focus on mental and physical health in the workplace is a good case study and starting point to introduce students to MPE.

Firstly, pedagogically, this case study draws on students' lived experience by focusing on work and on mental health especially, drawing on Freire's (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. On the one hand, many students work alongside their studies, with data from the United Kingdom reporting this to be as high as 69 percent of UK Higher Education students (National Union of Students 2023), and most students study with the hope that this will enable them to attain purposeful work, good working conditions, and a salary high enough to afford a decent lifestyle. On the other hand, mental health issues are of great concern, with increasing rates of mental health challenges reported by students in the United Kingdom (Lewis and Stiebahl 2024).

Secondly, our emphasis on mental health in the workplace is highly relevant as a major factor driving today's mental health crisis relates to our workplaces. These oftentimes remain unhealthy environments despite most people spending most of their awake time at work (Office for National Statistics 2023). While being unemployed or under-employed is linked with mental distress in a world that requires us to cater for most of our needs via the private market, most workers place importance on doing work they deem purposeful (Corduneanu et al. 2022). Yet, in 2023, only 10 percent of all UK employees reported feeling engaged at work (Gallup 2023). Unsurprisingly, then, more than half of workers state that they feel very stressed or fairly stressed at work, with only 10 percent saying they do not feel stressed at all by their work (Kirk 2022). Health and Safety Executive statistics show that stress, depression, and anxiety account for 49 percent of all work-related ill-health (Health and Safety Executive 2023), followed by musculoskeletal disorders (27 percent) that have been linked to prolonged use of computers by office workers (Malińska, Bugajska, and Bartuzi 2021; Basakci Calik et al. 2022).

Finally, conceptually, the workplace is a core focus for Marx, in terms of where surplus value is created and as a key site for class struggle. Marx's view of how value is created in a capitalist system, including his perspective on how it results in exploitation and alienation, provides students with a coherent explanation for why entrenched economic inequalities persist. MPE stresses that feelings of disengagement at work are not an individual's failure but the logical consequence of how work is organized under capitalism. Cognizant of this perspective, the implications for public health responses to mental distress are markedly different. Today, common responses to the so-called mental health crisis include the promotion of "self-help" products (i.e., meditation apps or yoga gym contracts), the prescription of cognitive behavioral therapy, and the organization of mindfulness workshops to help individuals to adopt strategies that can help them to build their resilience and to cope with stress and anxiety in the workplace (Ferguson 2017; Wrenn 2022). However, given the extent of mental ill-health in today's societies, such approaches appear to have had a limited impact, which underscores the importance of this case study. Instead of attempting to fix individuals or provide them with the means to cope with this systemic violence, Marx's analysis emphasizes the need to address a system that leads to alienation and produces mental ill-health as a by-product.

3. Introducing Economics Students to MPE in Practice

Having established the value of teaching MPE, we turn to how we have done this in practice. Our experience is drawn from teaching students on different programs, including Economics and Global Health at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, across multiple institutions and in both in-person/on-campus and distance learning contexts. In all cases, there has been limited space in the curriculum to discuss alternative economic schools of thought. The core activities that we outline below can be used in different ways, depending on how specific courses are structured and how teaching time is allocated and timetabled. For example, more traditional courses

might involve an introductory lecture followed by student time for further reading that is then brought together in a discussion-based seminar or tutorial. Conversely, more recently flipped classroom approaches require students to engage with content in advance of classroom contact time (Roach 2014; Lage, Platt, and Treglia 2000). The activities outlined below assume around two hours of classroom time and two to three hours of student preparation and reading time. The core components of our teaching approach can be reordered and linked in different ways depending on institutional and course specificities.

3.1. Activity 1—Discussion of student's lived experiences of work

This activity entails asking students to discuss their own experiences of the workplace with a focus on aspects of that experience that can be used to introduce some basic Marxian terminology and concepts. We have used the following questions to facilitate these discussions:

1. Briefly describe the workplace and your role there
2. Were there ever times when you tried to avoid doing work?
3. How did management monitor what you did, that is, how did they make sure you did work?
4. How did wages differ across different roles in that workplace?
5. Were there ever times that you felt physically or mentally unwell because of your work?

The precise order of the questions can be varied but what is of importance is that at different points of the discussion the lecturer can highlight how what the students are discussing can be cast in Marxian terms as a starting point for a more formal presentation later on. For example, asking students if they ever try to avoid doing work enables a reflection on the distinction between *labor power* and *labor*, and the question about wages can enable a deeper exploration of class relations, including (depending on the preexisting knowledge of students) the basic distinction between workers and capital, and how these categories are used to analyze different relational positions in the workplace, such as the role of middle management. Typically, we have tried to have this discussion first before we cover the theory more formally as it is a good way to begin to challenge students to think differently while locating this subject in their own lived experiences.

3.2. Activity 2—Short lecture

The second activity is a short lecture. This has been delivered in the classroom, but also prerecorded for students to watch online. The purpose of the lecture is to introduce Marx's view on how labor is created in a capitalist production system more formally, while also providing students with some general background to Marx's approach and methods. The recorded version of this lecture was around 20 minutes with a total of eight slides. Following a brief introduction, the lecture begins with Marx's famous quote about the spider, the bee, and the architect² as a way in to explain Marx's focus on processes of production and reproduction, which is then followed by an introduction of Historical Materialism as Marx's methodological approach. We then go through the circuit of capital as a way of showing how the system reproduces itself and expands, leading to the discussion of where additional value is created, and the difference between surplus value and profits. The lecture finishes by covering the concept of alienation.

²The full quote is: "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (Marx 1976: 284).

3.3 Activity 3—Core reading

We suggest using the following core reading to bring together the two previous activities. Both readings use and apply core Marxian ideas and concepts to the issue of health in the workplace.

- Raju J. Das. 2023. Capital, capitalism, and health (Das 2023 in appendix B)
- Emil Øversveen, and Connor A. Kelly. 2022. Alienation: A useful concept for health inequality research (Øversveen and Kelly 2022 in appendix B)

The first article incorporates many direct quotations from Marx's original work, including *Capital* volume 1, and explores a wide range of dimensions through which capitalism impacts workers' health. The second article focuses on the notion of alienation and the mechanisms through which social inequalities shape psychosocial well-being. These two readings draw explicitly on Marx's work and offer slightly different but complementary angles on the topic. If there is time, students could also be asked to read chapter 10, "The Working Day" from *Capital* volume 1, or at least some of its sections (Marx 1976 in appendix B). We have provided a further reading list in appendix A and a full reference list for all teaching materials in appendix B.

3.4. Activity 4—Case study exercise

The final activity involves the application of the theoretical ideas covered in the previous activities to real-world case studies. There are many different examples that could be used for this. We have typically used the following two core case studies, but if the below resources are not available through your institution, then there are many examples that would work. We selected the case studies to represent the experiences of workers in different parts of the world.

3.4.1. Case study 1: Amazon Workers

3.4.1.1. Materials

- A 30-minute BBC documentary titled *Amazon: The Truth Behind the Click* (BBC 2013 in appendix B)
- A report published by UNI Global Union titled *Life in the Amazon Panopticon: An International Survey of Amazon Workers* (UNI Global Union 2023 in appendix B)

The materials in this case study highlight a range of Marxian concepts. The video shows undercover footage shot by a temporary worker in an Amazon warehouse in the United Kingdom. It shows how their work is organized and monitored by a handheld scanner that maps out the route that they should take in the warehouse, how long it should take to get to each item and counts down the second in real time to each location in the warehouse (not to mention the bleeping noise it makes many times a minute). This illustrates how the labor process is designed to ensure that workers work at maximum efficiency for every minute of their working day. It shows how technology designed to extract labor creates significant mental and physical exertion, and how the worker is alienated from the work they do given they have no agency or control in relation to how their work is done. The video also captures discussions with warehouse managers who monitor performance and push for continuous improvements. The survey complements this by providing evidence from a wider range of Amazon workers across the globe but speaking to similar themes of intense work driven by technology and (often unrealistic) performance indicators.

3.4.2. Case study 2: Garment workers in India

3.4.2.1. Materials

- A short BBC news video titled *Indian Factory Workers Supplying Major Brands Allege Exploitation* (BBC News 2020 in appendix B)
- A short BBC news article titled *Workplace Accidents: Inside India's "Factories of Death"* (Shukla 2022 in appendix B)
- A report titled *Insights into Working Conditions in India's Garment Industry* published by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (ILO 2015 in appendix B).

The second case study also reflects many of the core themes above about low wages, poor working conditions, coercion, and lack of rights within the workplace and how these underpin the exploitation of labor in the garment sector in India. It particularly reflects and brings to life many themes noted in Marx's description of industrial workplaces in the chapter on the working day. The ILO report also discusses the limited effectiveness of factory inspectors, actors who also appear in numerous places in *Capital* volume 1. The case study provides a view from the Global South which serves as a contrast to the Amazon case study.

Students are asked to engage with the materials of one of the case studies and apply the theoretical ideas covered in activities 2 and 3 to the case study, explaining in Marxian terms what is going on and why. This case study activity can be implemented in different ways. For on-campus students, they can either watch the videos and engage with the material before class or in small groups in the classroom. For distance learning students, we have asked them to engage with the materials and then write a short 500-word reflection.

4. Further Comments

Our approach has a range of benefits which we think can help students leave the class, however time-constrained this may be, with more than a superficial understanding of Marx. Firstly, our teaching example demonstrates the relevance of a Marxist approach to contemporary issues and highlights the unique insights that this analysis offers. Typically, the field of mental health is primarily dominated by biomedical and psychological approaches, with a focus on building resilience and self-help approaches dominant within many workplaces. However, MPE locates experiences of poor mental health within the labor process, pointing toward the structural and systemic roots of this health crisis. This different perspective can help students make sense of their own experiences of poor health within the workplace and that this results from systemic harm enacted upon them, rather than their own lack of resilience. With mainstream economists well known for trumpeting the scientific rigor and explanatory power of neoclassical economics (Lazear 2000), it is important to make the value of studying Marx clear.

The case study has implications for policy making. Many, if not all, economics programs are increasingly marketing themselves as engaging with real-world issues and emphasize a focus on policy making. The Marxian analysis points toward alternative policies to address mental health such as improving working conditions, wages, and autonomy at work, which are in contrast to workplace well-being programs and the promotion of the idea that individuals are responsible for looking after their own mental health. However, this case study also enables a discussion about the limits of policy and the importance of class struggle and the role of unions and worker organization to fight for better working conditions, and the potential resistance that employers may have to this. This can also create space for a consideration of anti-capitalist action, and what workplaces might look like under socialism and how they would provide more fulfilling and healthy work environments.

The material covered here also enables a comparison with some core elements of mainstream economics which can also help students get a better sense of Marxian ideas. These can include, but are not limited to, the focus of Marx on the sphere of production as opposed to the sphere of the market, historical versus ahistorical approaches, the notion that workers and capitalists have competing interests and that there are inherent contradictions and conflicts within capitalism as opposed to general equilibrium analyses that align the interests of optimizing agents, and reflections on methodological individualism that are contrasted with Marx's class-based analysis. Debates in the classroom can also develop organically. For example, in our practice this material has resulted in discussions about how economists think about work (Spencer 2009), and deeper more philosophical discussions about the characterization of human nature in different economic perspectives. Deeper and critical engagement with how Marx conceptualizes the creation of value in society can also promote broader discussions on the limitations of capitalism and its destructive impact on the environment and human health, including debates on how and whether the capitalist system can be reformed.

The focus on health in the workplace also has implications for employability skills. While it is hoped that some students may be inspired to organize and unionize in their workplaces, understanding the sources of poor health in the workplace may help them be more humane managers in their future professional lives.

Given that this teaching case study focuses on only one week of a course, we do not have specific student feedback on how this topic was received.³ Informally, our experience has been that this has always generated a lot of good discussion and has inspired some students to engage with political economy issues in their dissertations. However, this does point toward a future research agenda focusing on how students experience being introduced to MPE in their economics education, especially when this topic is competing for space in the curriculum.

5. Conclusion

This teaching case study has worked for us as an excellent introduction to MPE, bringing to life what can at times feel like an abstract and confusing theory to students. We hope that by focusing on an example that is rooted in students' lived experiences in the workplace and that illustrates the continued relevance of Marx, we may help dispel some unhelpful and inaccurate myths about Marx, introduce students to some core Marxian ideas and terminology, and foster interest in further engagement with Marx and political economy more generally. We also hope that the activities we have documented and the other resources we have provided in this article are of practical use and can serve as a starting point for instructors who are keen to promote MPE in their courses.

Appendix A—Further Reading

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³For a review of how students have experienced the introduction of pluralist teaching more generally, see Deane, Van Waeyenberge, and Maxwell (2019).

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Appendix B: Core Teaching Materials

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