Abolish the Fed! No taxation without representation! Tax the rich! Corporations are people! Eliminate student debt! Stop global warming! Drill, baby, drill!

To orient ourselves in a world of political passion we often try to differentiate slogans like these into “liberal,” “conservative,” and “radical.” This course is concerned with the tradition of radical thinking, meaning thinking that addresses fundamental issues of social order and change. All political thought focuses on questions of liberty, equality, and social solidarity, but radical thinking highlights the way historical change affects our political values. If change is a constant in radical thought, what kinds of change do radicals support? What can or ought an individual do to foster or resist change? To learn how to think about social change and its limits, we start with the emergence of liberalism out of the feudal despotism. Liberalism is the first body of thought to contrast government to the state of nature. After characterizing liberalism’s achievements, we turn to its problems. Our guide is liberalism’s greatest critic, Karl Marx. If liberalism inquires into the nature of liberty, then Marx asks whether there can be liberty without equality and solidarity. In the confrontation between Marx and liberal thought, we encounter the unstable nature of private property. Property—in forms like taxes, tuition, debt, corporations, patents, and common goods—is the theme that propels us into thinking radically about contemporary issues. How is the African-American freedom struggle related to the forms of private property in the US? How does taxing the rich promote liberty differently than abolishing the Fed? How is student debt related to education as a public good? What role do unions play in a world of global competition?

The course develops analytic, research, and argumentative skills through individual and team activities. Early on you will pick a slogan that motivates you, and analyze it in different contexts over the course of the semester, working towards a final project.