

M.A. Student Spotlight

BRUCE BERNSTEIN is pursuing an M.A., with a focus on political economy. He works for the NYC public hospital system (NYC Health + Hospitals) at Elmhurst Hospital, doing grant development, grant management, and whatever else they assign him.



Sarah Lenfest: You've had a successful career working in technology and, since 2013, in health care. What inspired you to return to school and pursue a graduate degree in Political Science?

Bruce Bernstein: During my twenties, I was involved in a lot of political and social activism, including six years as a community organizer in Philadelphia and Chicago. I started during the Vietnam era, so much of our activity and analysis centered around anti-imperialism. Through this organizing, I also received my first introduction to Marxism. At the same time, rapid transformations were occurring in the tech landscape, which I saw was creating new needs and changing the economy in important ways. I returned to school in 1981 at Queens College to study computer science and math, and went into the tech industry.

In the 1990s and 2000s, for 13 years I was working in local economic development as the head of the New York Software Industry Association, trying to create high-tech jobs in the city. I became more and more interested in economics, but had never studied it formally. Around this time, I saw Dr. Corey Robin speaking on CSPAN and was interested in what he was talking about. I reached out to him and asked to take his Grad Center course on the political theory of capitalism as a non-matriculating student, and he was nice enough to accept me.

I'd been out of school for 30 years and had no idea what I was getting into, but I really enjoyed the experience and appreciated the energy and knowledge that other students brought to seminar discussions. I began to look into how I could matriculate as a Masters' student. With my professional work, I needed a lot of flexibility in designing my graduate studies. Dr. Alyson Cole and Corey Robin were very encouraging and supportive in this respect.

SL: How has your experience in the department been?

BB: I have found a home here. The professors are very strong and I really enjoy the other students. They bring a diversity of life experiences to the program, I get a lot of energy from them and they open my mind. I highly recommend the program to other mid- and late-career students — the department been helpful in navigating the challenges of balancing work and studies, and it is actually a great time in life to go to grad school!

SL: How have your interests developed through your classes and research, and what are you hoping to delve into more in writing your MA Thesis?

BB: A major concern of mine in studying political economy has been to gain a deeper understanding of the systemic and structural origins of inequality. More specifically, I'm interested in looking at how technological developments shape new class structures, and how emerging sectors structure peoples' working lives differently. People are increasingly resorting to side gigs to make ends meet, whether turning their cars into taxis or their apartments into hotels. There is a mentality of constantly figuring out how to sell things — how is this impacting people's outlook on the world? How are these economic factors related to new right-wing political movements?