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# MARXISM IN AMERICA

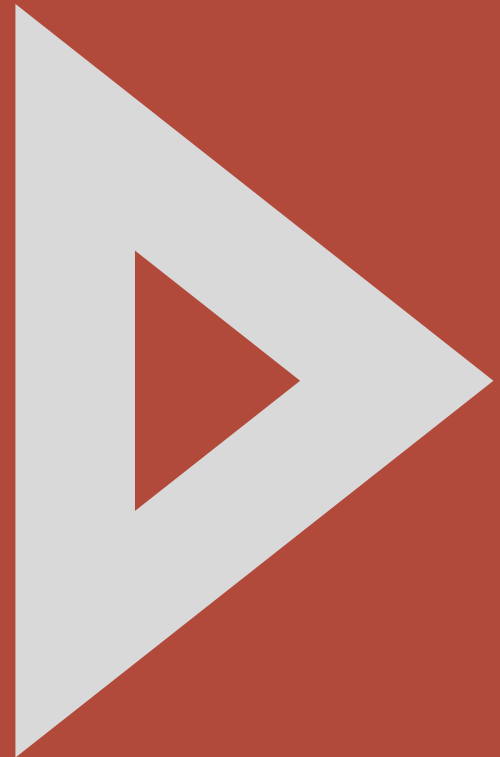
History, Theory, Culture



# OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2



1. May 6 – Marxism: what it is ...and isn't
2. May 13 – Immigrant beginnings (1865-1900): Jewish Socialism in NYC
3. May 20 – Distinctly American Socialism
4. May 27 – The Debs Era
5. June 3 – Leninism in America
6. June 24 – Authoritarian Collectivisms
7. July 1 – Rise of the Culture Critique (1925-1940)
8. July 8 – After Leninism (1940-1960)
9. July 15 – The New Left and Decolonization
10. July 22 – Neoliberalism and Neocolonialism
11. July 29 – Visionary Gradualism & Battling the Era of Growing Inequality



# COURSE DISCLAIMERS

## I am an openly proud Marxist

1

Like all humans, I do not have the ability to be objective — I have my own personal biases, implicit and explicit. I believe that the Marxist view of history is the most accurate view of history, which is to say that I believe that changes in history are the result of dueling factions of laborers for the power of this labor and that the material conditions and ideological background of our societies should be the most important focus of any sociological or historical inquiry of worth. This being said, I welcome and always love to discuss topics such as these, so please do not feel you cannot voice opposition.

## We simply cannot cover everything

2

Every professor has their specialization—very few have general specializations in their disciplines. My discipline is Cultural Studies, the field that focuses on the ideological and material powers that inform cultural production. I am not an economist and I am not a historian. However, I have produced scholarly research and teaching resources for this course that many will find interesting and worth reading. Unfortunately, we cannot cover everything in a single class or even multiple classes. People spend their entire careers focusing on just one of the time periods of labor history that we are discussing. I will always be able to point you in the direction of more research, as I am a professional researcher capable of finding resources (even if I am unfamiliar with the content of these resources).

# COURSE DISCLAIMERS

## **There are so many tendencies of Marxist thought**

3

As with any form of philosophical and political inquiry, there are as many Marxisms as there are Marxists. Each person and 'tendency' has its own assumptions, beliefs, and significant motivations for action. The focus of our inquiry will mostly be, in the beginning of the course, on labor movements and American Socialism - more aligned with Orthodox Marxism. Then, we will focus on protest cultures in America - more aligned with the Trotskyist tendency (as opposed to the Stalinist tendency). We will discuss what many of the tendencies in Marxism are, but we will inevitably leave some out. Our assumption should always be that there are immense amounts of Marxisms – and just because someone claims Marxism does not mean they are necessarily considered a 'true' Marxist by others.

## **We are discussing philosophy, political economy, & labor history – not political action.**

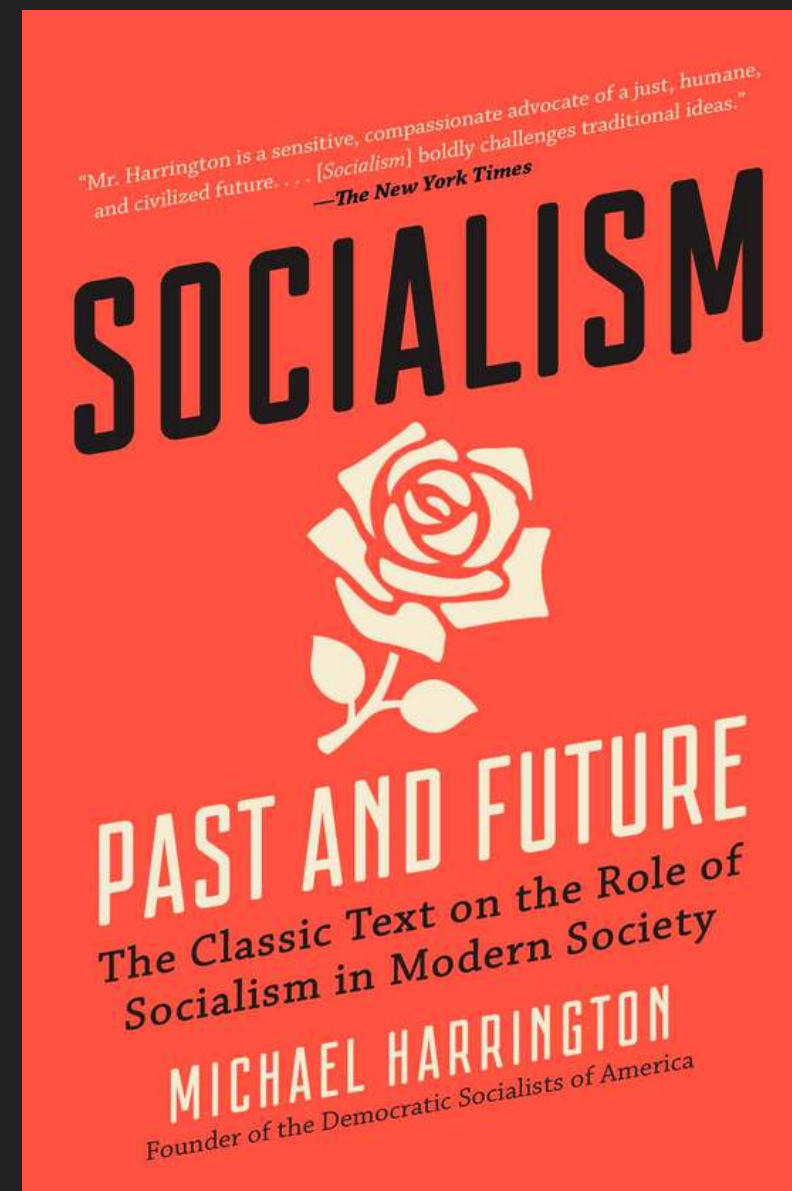
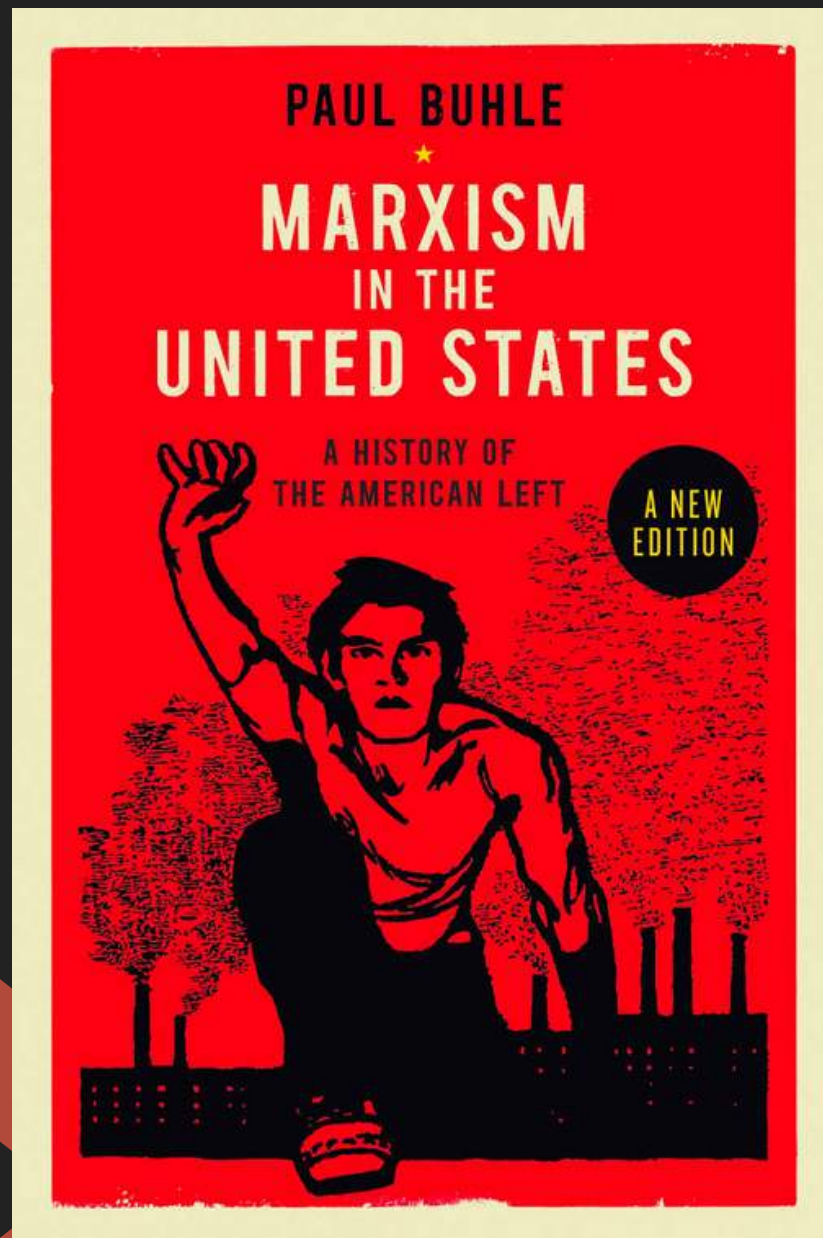
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This is not a political action committee nor is this a politically affiliated organization; so, it should be noted that all of our inquiries and discussions will be academically based. This means that we will not accuse one another of being 'commies' or 'lefties' or whatever other derogatorily slanted term we might imagine. We are each curious inquirers on a journey of discovery about a topic that has impacted billions of people throughout history. We are not using our class for political activism - though we are political actors.



# Recommended Purchases

There are two main texts that I recommend purchasing for the course. We will begin with them next week.



Other texts were sent in the email I sent on the course readings for today. These are ones we will discuss in short but will not be discussed at length:

- The Socialist Manifesto by Bhaskar Sunkara
- anything by Jodi Dean, but especially her books Communist Horizon and Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies
- Why Marx Was Right by Terry Eagleton
- The S Word: A Short History of an American Tradition...Socialism by John Nichols -- This was also made into a documentary recently, and we will watch some of this in class
- Socialism 101 by Kathleen Sears
- The Socialist Challenge Today by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin

# A REVIEW OF ECONOMICS & POLITICS

## Communism

*everything shared in  
common, stateless  
and classless society*

## Liberalism/ Neoliberalism

*laissez-faire economy,  
class society based on  
generational wealth,  
little intervention by  
state*

## Libertarianism

*stateless society,  
private property  
protected by  
individuals, corporate  
control of all social  
goods*

# A REVIEW OF ECONOMICS & POLITICS

Communism

Liberalism/  
Neoliberalism

Libertarianism

**State communism/  
Socialism**

*state control of  
everything,  
politburo bourgeois,  
two-class society  
based on ideology*

**Fascism**

*state control of  
everything, hierarchical  
society with state  
reinforcement, class  
society based on ideology*

# A REVIEW OF ECONOMICS & POLITICS

	<i>mixed economy, all social goods provided by state, labor union and state work to protect individual from corporate interest, class society based on labor</i>		<i>state protects corporate interest, labor unions discouraged or outlawed, deregulated market &amp; class society based on wealth (made or generational)</i>	
Communism	<b>Democratic Socialism/ Social Democracy</b>	Liberalism/ Neoliberalism	<b>Market Capitalism/ Centrism</b>	Libertarianism
.....				
	State communism/ Socialism			Fascism





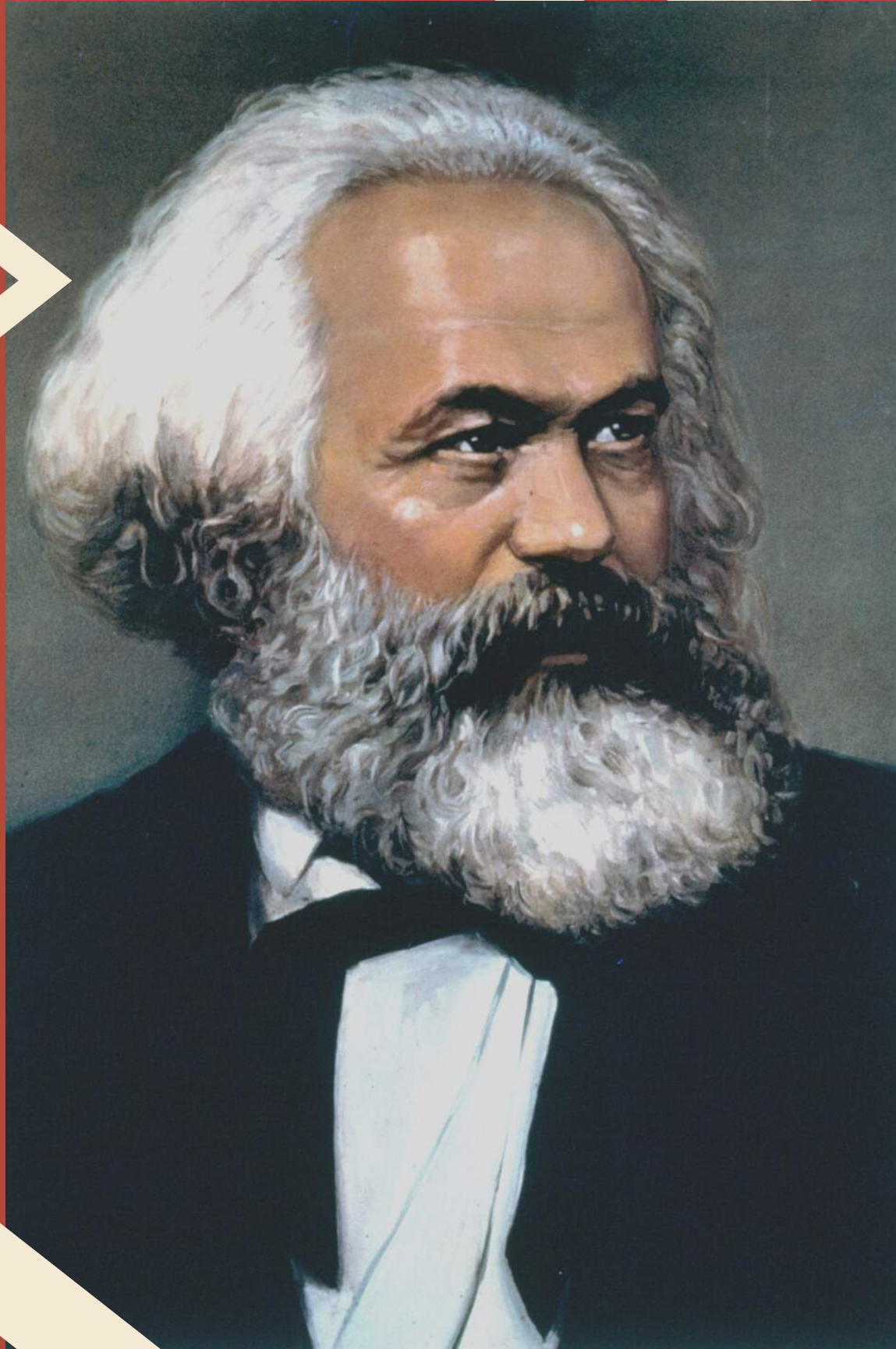
# MARXISM IN AMERICA

An introduction to our topic





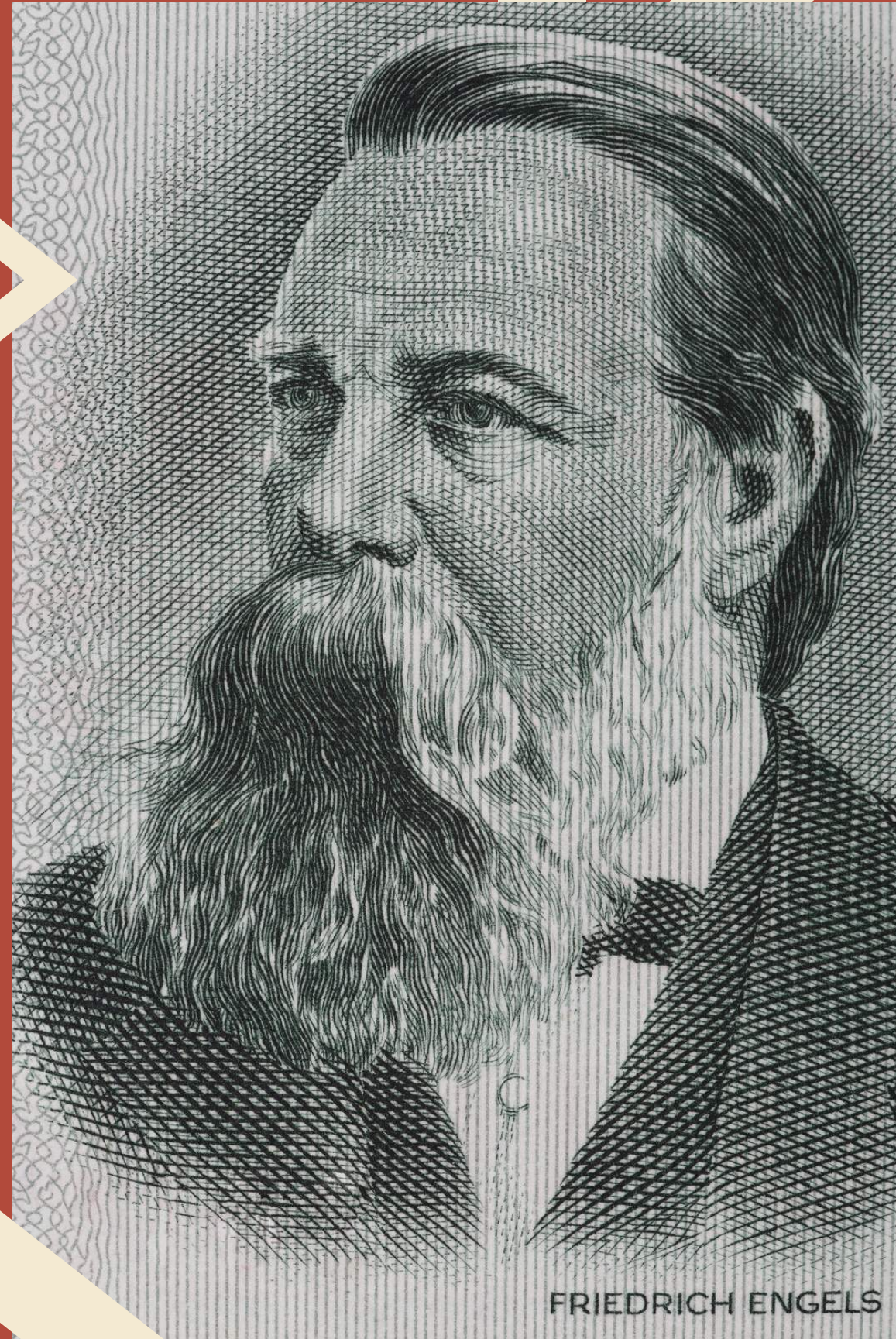
# WHO IS THE MARX IN MARXISM?



- Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German Jewish political theorist and philosopher.
- He studied law and philosophy and spent most of his life publishing political writings, which resulted in him losing his citizenship and becoming a stateless individual.
- He was a member of a radical group of political philosophers known as the "Young Hegelians," who took the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and read it as revolutionary (as opposed to the 'Old Hegelians' who read it as conservative).
- His most (in)famous work, with longtime friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), was commissioned by the Communist League in order to summarize Marx & Engels' work in political economy, namely on the nature of capitalism and need to critique and eventually overthrow its means of production.
- The much longer, denser *Capital* (in 3 volumes) argues in detail that capitalism in the Industrial Age had changed the way society, government, and human psychology functioned.



# SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM



- In 1840, anarcho-socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon coined the term *scientific socialism* to define a new kind of experiment of government whereby the government and the means of production (the economy) would be ruled using reason (objective science) rather than will (power/strength).
- Engels will use the term later to describe Marx's theories about society, politics, and economy.
- Socialism did not begin with Marx, Engels or even Proudhon. For many centuries what we call socialism had existed. Marx's critique of the copious amounts of experiments with socialism was that they were utopian, arising from moral questions rather than the inherent contradictions found in the relations of the classes under capitalism.
- Therefore, Marx and Engels theorize scientific socialism as the resolution of the inherent contradictions present in the capitalist economy:
  - Capitalist wants to make as much money as possible and pay as little for labor as possible.
  - Laboring class wants to not be exploited.



# W.E.B. DUBOIS "THE PROPAGANDA OF HISTORY"

## FROM BLACK RECONSTRUCTION



What are American children taught today about Reconstruction? Helen Boardman has made a study of current textbooks and notes these three dominant theses:

1. *All Negroes were ignorant.*
2. *All Negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant.*
3. *Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction*

Grounded in such elementary and high school teaching, an American youth attending college today would learn from current textbooks of history that the Constitution recognized slavery; that the chance of getting rid of slavery by peaceful methods was ruined by the Abolitionists...He would read that Harriet Beecher Stowe brought on the Civil War; and that Negroes were the only people to achieve emancipation with no effort on their part. That Reconstruction was a disgraceful attempt to subject white people to ignorant Negro rule; and that, according to a Harvard professor of history, "Legislative expenses were grotesquely extravagant; *the colored members in some states engaging in a saturnalia of corrupt expenditure.*" In other words, he would in all probability complete his education without any idea of the part which the black race has played in America; the cause and meaning of the Civil War and the relation which Reconstruction had to democratic government and the labor movement today. Herein lies more than mere omission and difference of emphasis...We have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans.

# W.E.B. DUBOIS "THE PROPAGANDA OF HISTORY"

FROM BLACK RECONSTRUCTION



But are these reasons of courtesy and philanthropy sufficient for denying Truth? If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guide-post for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation.

If, on the other hand, we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art using the results of science, and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish.

It is propaganda like this that has led men in the past to insist that history is "lies agreed upon"; and to point out the danger in such misinformation. It is indeed extremely doubtful if any permanent benefit comes to the world through such action. Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?

# W.E.B. DUBOIS "THE PROPAGANDA OF HISTORY"

FROM BLACK RECONSTRUCTION



One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive Negroes as men; in their minds the word "Negro" connotes "inferiority" and "stupidity" lightened only by unreasoning gayety and humor. Suppose the slaves of 1860 had been white folk. Stevens would have been a great statesman, Sumner a great democrat, and Schurz a keen prophet, in a mighty revolution of rising humanity. Ignorance and poverty would easily have been explained by history, and the demand for land and the franchise would have been justified as the birthright of natural free- men.

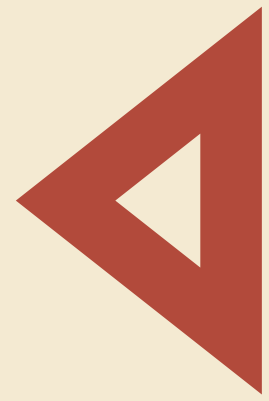
But Burgess was a slaveholder, Dunning a Copperhead and Rhodes an exploiter of wage labor. Not one of them apparently ever met an educated Negro of force and ability. Around such impressive thinkers gathered the young post-war students from the South. They had been born and reared in the bitterest period of Southern race hatred, fear and contempt. Their instinctive reactions were confirmed and encouraged in the best of American universities. Their scholarship, when it regarded black men, became deaf, dumb and blind. The clearest evidence of Negro ability, work, honesty, patience, learning and efficiency became distorted into cunning, brute toil, shrewd evasion, cowardice and imitation—a stupid effort to transcend nature's law.



# W.E.B. DUBOIS, LABOR THEORY OF VALUE, NATURALIZATION THEORY

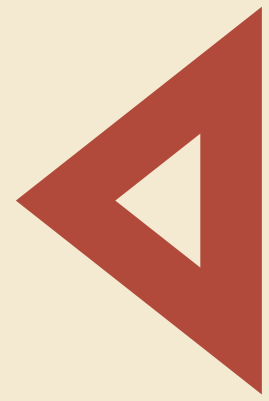


- One thing that we learn from DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* in the final chapter is that history is a narrative, a story that is told to us by (flawed) humans about other (flawed) humans. In the service of politics or other ideological machinations, these stories may be told with a particular slant—often, in America, this slant is one that sanctifies white Protestant property-owning capitalists as the 'natural' leaders.
- This sort of **naturalization theory** for capitalism is inevitably tied to racial terrorism insofar as the very same people who believe in the inherent ineptitude of Black and Brown people—in the 'savage' nature of Natives, as the *Declaration of Independence* puts it—are the people who participate in acts of racial terror or protect those who do by ignoring these acts or protecting the right to commit these acts.
- That capitalism is 'human nature' is a *very* recent theory among academic circles largely spawned by the popularity of folks like Ayn Rand. However, capitalism is a system of social relations wherein the propertied class (those who own/employ) incorporate the unpropertied class (those who rent/work) through what Marx calls 'exploitation.' For Marx, you see, 'exploitation' was not an abstract term – it was a mathematical value.
- The **labor theory of value**, theorized by classical economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo, states that the value of a particular good is based on the labor it took to produce that commodity. 'Surplus' in classical economics is the profit an employer makes when the cost of production is subtracted from the market value. Marx calls this value 'exploitation.'



# WHAT DID THE REAL KARL MARX EVEN DO?

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, while they were each members of several different political parties and activist circles on the left of the political spectrum (they were even commissioned to write a pamphlet for one of them called *The Communist Manifesto*), *Capital* — Marx's magnum opus, volumes 2 and 3 of which were edited and published after his death by Engels — is not a political treatise. It is much more boring than this: it is an observational account of the workings of the new form of economics arising in the Nineteenth Century called **capitalism**.
- Basically, Marx wanted to figure out several fundamental things in *Capital* and his other philosophical writings:
  - a. ***How does capitalism work?*** – meaning, what is the relationship between the actors at the micro and macro levels of the economic system coming into being during the Nineteenth Century's **industrial revolution**?
  - b. ***What brought about capitalism?*** – meaning what had to occur politically, philosophically, socially for people to agree to sell their labor to someone else; what brought about the end of **mercantilism**?
  - c. ***What will come of this?*** – meaning, if capitalism bases its entire system on a form of **exploitation** that it calls '**profit**' that is *not* distributed among the laboring class but is held by the propertied class, what will happen when the workers realize this (what Marx calls reaching **class consciousness**)?
- In reality, *Capital* is a love letter to the economic system called capitalism. Many times, Marx will make the argument that capitalism is a necessary part of human history as it improves the productivity of the species exponentially.



# STAGISM, COMMUNISM, DIALECTICS

- However, Marx also thought that as a result of the increased productivity, humans were incapable of keeping up with the requirement to increase profits ad infinitum. He theorized a world where machinery would eventually takeover all of human labor abilities, leaving humans to do whatever it is they want that does not necessarily require subsistence profit. As mechanization becomes a reality, this is likely why Marx has come into fashion again.
- In truth, Marxist ideas have never really been 'out of fashion' – at least not with the working classes of the world. It is the case today, in a globalized economy, that most of the working classes live in developing countries where labor regulation is minimal and therefore production costs are cheap. Once we get to neoliberalism, we will discuss the consumer-producer paradigm shift that occurs after the Second World War.
- ***What about communism?*** Karl Marx was not himself a 'communist' in the sense we use the word today. As a philosopher and political economist, Marx was an observer and detailer - like a historian. He predicted and philosophized about the moral capability or incapability of certain observations. Nonetheless, he believed in what is in the Orthodox Marxist tendency called a **stagist** history, which he based off of his reading of Hegel.
  - 1) Primitive Communism, 2) Mercantilism, 3) Capitalism, 4) Socialism, 5) Communism
  - At the shift between each of these stages (from 1 to 2, from 2 to 3, from 3 to 4, etc.), he believed there was a ***dialectic*** shift, meaning a reversal in the relation between the two main classes. This shift is what we today call 'revolution' (meaning, literally, to turn around). The view of history in this way is called **dialectical materialism**.



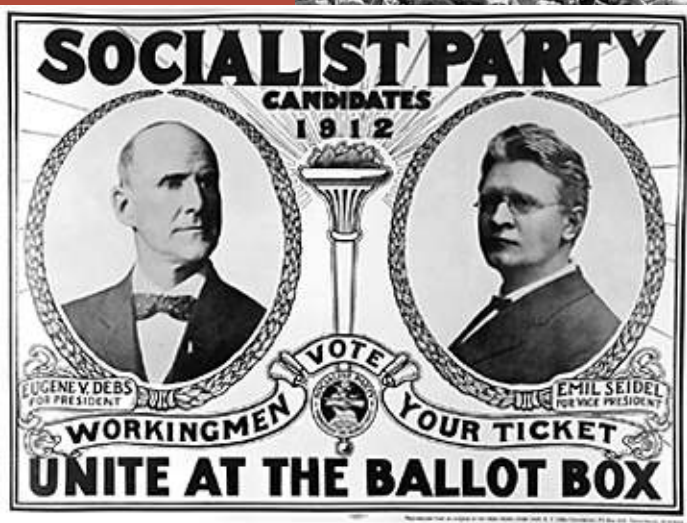
# MARXIST ANALYSIS

## Historical materialism & Dialectics

*Historical materialism*, the theory that all of history is based around the struggle between classes who are defined by the materials they have (physical conditions), is what Karl Marx adds to the study of political economy. He does this by using what Hegel calls the *dialectical* view of history (that within each historical conjuncture is the contradicting social forces that will bring about its destruction and harken in a new historical conjuncture). This process is often referred to as *thesis, antithesis, synthesis*.

## Ideology and Superstructure

In the 20th century, Marxists use historical materialism to analyze not only physical conditions but psychological and sociological phenomena. *Ideology*, the beliefs of a given context or project, are embedded within society in what is called the *superstructure*, the given set of beliefs of a specific historical era or conjuncture. The cultural production of any society, Marxists argue, has embedded within it the ideology of that society simply by its having been created by that society. This means that when we analyze a cultural text (film, song, novel, poem, music video), we can discover the *political subconscious* of the society that produced it.



# WHY STUDY MARXISM IN AMERICA?

- **Reason #1, History:** Perhaps the most controversial figure in all of history after Jesus of Nazareth, Karl Marx and the theory named after him has inspired countless revolutions and academic critiques of the political economy under which the majority of the world lives today: capitalism.
- **Reason #2, Academics:** The use of Marxist analysis has been the basis of many disciplines that were created and/or formalized in the United States, including literary studies, sociology, history, American Studies, Black studies, Cultural studies, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, women and gender studies, queer studies, and many more.
- **Reason #3, Culture:** Marxism provides a useable form of analysis that takes into account multiple political, economic, historical, and social facets of society. Using what is called "materialist analysis" or "conjunctural analysis", cultural scholars can uncover the function of different instruments of politics and culture in given contexts.
- **Reason #4, Historical & Contemporary Politics:** Marxist critique has been an instrumental part of various political movements throughout American history, including in our current moment, where the term 'socialist' is thrown both as insult and worn as a badge of legitimacy.



- Capitalism is an economic system.

VIVEK CHIBBER  
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

18:41

-103:56



# RECAP

## **Marx was more interested in observing and writing than he was in 'changing the world'**

His most influential works have been misnomers, really, to his entire oeuvre. Most of his work was dedicated to explaining very fundamental economic realities and predictions based on mathematics and logical assumptions. He believed that history was made up of stages and that in order for there to be a paradigm shift, a revolution, the two main classes would have been dueling and their contradictions would result in a conflict at the end of which one will come out on top. One example of this is the shift from capitalism to socialism, which he argues will come about because there are two main classes with opposing/contradicting economic desires: the proletariat/working class want higher wages for less work while the bourgeoisie/propertied class want more work and lower wages.

## **Interpreting the world and the political economy are significant for understanding our world (and bringing about a new one)**

The influence of Marx persists not because he was a loved/hated political radical like Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, or Che Guevara. He was a largely unknown, extremely poor philosopher during his life. His influence persists throughout the world because many were inspired by his interpretation of history (as a group of revolutions that resulted from class contradictions), his prediction of a future beyond capitalism (which many regard as exploitative), and his notion that our philosophies are always tied to our material conditions (that we believe what we believe because of our lived reality).

# *Chicken Run* (2000)



- How is **class warfare** depicted in the film?
- Is the ending a **communist utopia**?
- Does Rocky represent America in some way? How so?
- What is the '**industrial revolution**' that occurs in the film?

# NEXT CLASS...

## May 13 – Immigrant beginnings (1865-1900): Jewish Socialism in NYC

The beginning of socialism in America predates Marx himself; so, we will discuss briefly some pre-Marxian socialist movements, mostly inspired by Fourier and Saint-Simon. But the Marxist movement didn't get its popularity until the Industrial Revolution made its way to the US of A after the Civil War.

- Ch. 1 "Immigrant Socialism" of Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left*
- Ch. 4 "The Creation of a Geoculture: Ideologies, Social Movements, Social Science" from *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* by Immanuel Wallerstein
- Ch. 2 "Socialisms" of Michael Harrington's *Socialism: Past and Future*
- Ch. 2 "The Politics of Accumulation: Struggle for Benefits" from *Historical Capitalism* by Immanuel Wallerstein
- Introduction "Socialism in American Jewish History" from *A Fire In Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* by Tony Michels