




OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

MARXISM IN AMERICA

History, Theory, Culture

OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2

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- A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide, consisting of a large light blue triangle pointing right, with a smaller yellow triangle pointing right inside it, and a small white triangle pointing right inside the yellow one.
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

RECAP

Materialist view of history focuses on the real - the scientifically observable

As Marx's chief observation of (and argument against) capitalism was its inability to sustain itself and society because of its irreconcilable contradictions, he (and all Marxists after him who fashioned themselves as scientific socialists—Kautsky, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, etc.) sought to explain how precisely socialism prevented and led to the elimination of the contradictions that capitalism could not withstand. Furthermore, Marx and Engels detail the difference between what they have theorized as *scientific socialism* (creation of a socially and economically sustainable society using scientific methods to perfect) versus *utopian socialism* (the preference for a socialist society because of a moral objection to capitalism's horrors).

Jewish immigrants were radicalized by their positions in society with the added help of German immigrants

After the Revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe failed to bring about world socialism, many from the Germanic countries fled to the United States – especially the midwest and the northeast. Jewish immigrants, arriving in America through Ellis Island fleeing persecution throughout Eastern Europe, became the underclass of American industry. As a result of living in slums throughout major metropolitan areas and experiencing horrific working and living conditions (pre-regulation era), Jews create a Yiddish print culture that focuses on labor issues. This brings about a Yiddish Socialist movement.

THE MODERN WORLD

WALLERSTEIN

Ideology

An ideology is more than a set of ideas or theories. It is more than a moral commitment or a worldview. It is a coherent strategy in the social arena from which one can draw quite specific political conclusions. In this sense, one did not need ideologies in previous world-systems, or indeed even in the modern world-system before the concept of the normality of change, and that of the citizen who was ultimately responsible for such change, were adopted as basic structural principles of political institutions. For ideologies presume that there exist competing groups with competing long-term strategies of how to deal with change and who best should take the lead in dealing with it. The ideologies were born in the wake of the French Revolution.

The Conservatives

The first to be born was the ideology of conservatism. This was the ideology of those who thought that the French Revolution and its principles were a social disaster. Almost immediately, some basic texts were written, one by Edmund Burke in England in 1790 and then a series by Joseph de Maistre in France. Both authors had previously been moderate reformers in their views. Both would now enunciate an arch-conservative ideology in reaction to what seemed to them a dangerous attempt of radical intervention in the basic structure of social order. What particularly upset them was the argument that the social order was infinitely malleable, infinitely improvable, and that human political intervention could and should accelerate the changes. Conservatives considered such intervention hybris, and very dangerous hybris at that. Their views were rooted in a pessimistic view of man's moral capacities; they found false and intolerable the fundamental optimism of the French revolutionaries.

THE MODERN WORLD

WALLERSTEIN

The Liberals

Those who thought that any return to the ancien regime was both undesirable and impossible had to regroup and develop a counter-ideology. This counterideology came to be called liberalism. The liberals wished to shed the albatross of association with the reign of terror and yet salvage what they thought was the underlying spirit that emerged from the french Revolution. They insisted that change was not only normal but inevitable, because we live in a world of eternal progress toward the good society. They acknowledged that overhasty change could be, indeed was, counterproductive, but they insisted that traditional hierarchies were untenable and basically illegitimate. Against conservatives who were the "Party of Order," liberals presented themselves as the "Party of Movement." Changing situations required constant reform of the institutions. But the consequent social change should occur at a natural pace-that is, neither too slowly nor too rapidly. They were also very suspicious of the mass of the population, the mob, who they thought were essentially uneducated and consequently irrational. This meant, the liberals concluded, that there was only one group that should take the lead and the responsibility for deciding on what changes were necessary-the specialists. Specialists, by definition, understood the realities of whatever they had studied and therefore could best formulate the reforms that were necessary and desirable. Specialists, by their training, were inclined to be prudent and insightful. They appreciated both the possibilities and the pitfalls of change. Since every educated person was a specialist in something, it followed that those who would be allowed to exercise the role of citizen were those who were educated and were therefore specialists. Others might eventually be admitted to this role, when they had received the proper education to permit them to join the society of rational, educated men. But what kind of education? The liberals argued that education had now to shift from the "traditional" forms of knowledge, what we today call the humanities, toward the only theoretical basis of practical knowledge, science. Science (replacing not only theologr but philosophy as well) offered the path for material and technological progress, and hence for moral progress.

THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM

WALLERSTEIN

The triumph of liberalism in defining the geoculture of the modern worldsystem in the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth was made possible institutionally by the development of the legal underpinnings of the liberal state. But it was also made possible by the rise and steadily increasing importance of the antisystemic movements. This may seem paradoxical, since antisystemic movements presumably exist to undermine the system, not to sustain it. Nonetheless, the activities of these movements served on the whole to reinforce the system considerably. Dissecting this seeming paradox is crucial to understanding the way in which the capitalist world-economy constantly growing in size and wealth and simultaneously in the polarization of its benefits-has been held together.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, workplace organizations (trade unions) and public arena organizations (workers' and socialist parties) began to emerge, first in the strongest centers of industrial production (western Europe and North America) and then elsewhere. For most of the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century, the state machineries were hostile to these organizations, as were the firms. It followed that the class struggle was a lopsided field of contention, in which the "social movement" was fighting a difficult, uphill battle for successive, relatively small concessions.

In this pattern of muted political struggle, there was a further element which returns us to our discussion of households and status-group identities. The social movement defined its struggle as that of the workers versus the capitalists. But who were the "workers"? In practice, they tended to be defined as adult males of the dominant ethnic group in a given country.

THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM

WALLERSTEIN

Those who were "excluded" from this category found that since they seemed to have little place in the socialist/workers' organizations, they had to organize themselves in status-group categories (women on the one hand and racial, religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups on the other). These groups were often quite as antisystemic as the labor and socialist movements, but they defined their immediate grievances quite differently. However, in organizing themselves along these lines, they entered into competition with and often opposition to the class-based organizations of the workers.

One basic debate involved whether it was more important for the oppressed groups to change themselves or to change the institutions that were oppressing them. This was sometimes phrased as the difference between a cultural strategy and a political strategy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, one could say not only that the political option had won out in this debate over strategy but that the antisystemic movements had agreed-each variety separately, but in parallel ways-on a two-step agenda of action: first obtain power in the state; then transform the world/the state/the society.

ASSOCIATIONISM

FOURIERISM, SAINT-SIMON



- Henri de Saint-Simon was an aristocrat believed to be descended from the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne.
- While much early socialist thought was a reaction against the miseries caused by the Industrial Revolution, Saint-Simon embraced science and industry as the keys to human progress. He believed that the laws of social development could be discovered by studying history. He came to the conclusion that history alternates between periods of equilibrium and imbalance. Societies change as a result of struggle between the productive and unproductive classes: slaves and masters, serfs and lords, plebeians and patricians.
- Unlike other socialist thinkers, Saint-Simon did not describe class struggle in terms of haves and have-nots. For him the conflict was between the productive classes and the parasites. Saint-Simon identified the vast majority of society in his own time as part of the productive “industrial/scientific” class, in which he included both workers and factory owners. Only the nobility and the clergy, who represented the last vestiges of feudal privilege, were unproductive. As long as the unproductive classes remained in power, they were a barrier to economic and social progress. For society to change, the modern productive classes had to recognize their common interests and band together.
- The famous dictum “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” was coined by Saint-Simon to describe the distribution of wealth in his proposed society, which consisted of three classes: the savants, the propertied, and the unpropertied.



ASSOCIATIONISM

FOURIERISM, SAINT-SIMON



- Fourier did not believe social or economic inequalities were the source of human misery. Instead, he thought that most problems were the result of the society's misuse of people's "passions."
- Everyone has something they like to do. Every passion is good for something. If each passion could be put to its proper use, the "**reign of Harmony**" would prevail.
- Fourier proposed the establishment of small communes, called phalanxes or phalansteries, which would allow society to make the best use of all human passions.
- Based on the number of personality types he believed existed, Fourier calculated that the optimum size of each phalanx would be about 1,600 people, a number that would get all necessary work done by assigning every passion to its proper job.
- Albert Brisbane brought Fourierism to the US from France in 1840. With the help of Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, Brisbane was able to introduce Fourier's theories to thousands of households across the northern states. His articles inspired the creation of more than forty **phalansteries** in the United States. Many of the communities combined Fourierism with transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, perfectionism, or Spiritualism. Most lasted only a few years. The longest-lived of the Fourierist communities was the North American Phalanx, which existed from 1843 to 1855.

UTOPIAN SOCIALISM

- It is, MARTIN BUBER wrote, “the goal of Utopian socialism ...to substitute society for State to the greatest degree possible, moreover a society that is ‘genuine’ and not a State in disguise.”
- Though utopia exalted society as against the state, it led to technocracy as well as anarchism, to Stalinism as well as the Israeli *kibbutzim*.
- This early socialism was concerned with morality, community, and feminism.
- In the past, Saint-Simon argued, government had been imposed upon society from the top down; it was not organic. But now society was becoming industrial, **the economic and the technological were the critical determinants of everything else**, and there would be no need of politics. The functional organization of production was all the leadership and direction that was needed. To be sure, there had to be leaders — Saint-Simon, like the other utopians, was appalled by the ugly competitive anarchy of *laissez-faire* — but now they would be defined organically, by their role in the economy, and not by an extraneous state. This tendency of socialism is today called libertarian socialism or anarcho-socialism, both of which are prescribed solutions that the IWW (International Workers of the World) will give upon its founding in the Nineteenth Century: government ought to “whither away” (Saint-Simon's words) and instead society ought to be governed by a confederation of rank-and-file labor unions.
 - When speaking of the term historically, we use “associationism” as Saint-Simon argues socialism was a society controlled from the bottom up by *associations of workers*.

UTOPIAN SOCIALISM

- **Robert Owen**, the Welsh textile worker who moved to Indiana in the early 19th century, proposed that the poor be put into “Villages of Cooperation” where, after initial public funding, they would pay their own way and engage in useful work that would make them disciplined and temperate. One theorist wrote of the scheme: “Mr. Owen’s object appears to me to be to cover the face of the country with workhouses, to rear up a community of slaves, and consequently to render the labouring part of the People absolutely dependent upon men of property.”
- These were theories he developed while still in Europe. However, Owen himself moved from humane elitism to a kind of working-class radicalism. One factor was that Owen’s atheism became widely known and he was effectively shut out of polite society. Even more important, the Anti-Combination acts, which had been passed in 1799 and 1800 at the height of anti-Jacobin sentiment and which had done so much to frustrate organizing among the workers, were repealed in 1824-25. Trade-union and cooperative activity began to grow.
- Owenism was thus transformed from a philanthropic, top-down scheme for evading the class struggle through cooperation into a bottom-up insurgency of working people who were determined to rely on their own strength.
- Eventually utopian socialism fails as it is not quite organized enough *as a movement* by the 1848 revolutions and the industrial working class with urbanized populations made rural, communes less likely to be achieved.

SPIRITUALISM, THE AMERICAN SOCIALISM

- Whereas to immigrant Socialists, Marxism offered a beginning point to assess their situation, **American reformers, intellectuals, and self-educated workers who started in a different conceptual place came to Marxism for confirmation and practical application of their ideas.** Important immigrant groups with then- own histories of quasi-religious radicalism also felt a certain kinship and instinctive understanding. In the broad sense, Marxist ideas have always and everywhere assimilated to American cultures and politics.
- American radicals found themselves compelled to complete the bourgeois revolution before moving onto grander goals. Like the Europeans they developed their ideas in the process. The peculiar radical ideology that grew out of the struggle for emancipation of Blacks, women and all Americans, offered a counterpart to Marxism's concentration upon the industrial worker. Spiritualism, the American Socialism, answered the need for a collective, egalitarian vision and nourished indigenous radicalism for decades.
- The influence of women's agitation joined with abolitionist- minded Blacks can now be seen as decisive for the overthrow of slavery. The massive women's mobilization during the Civil War, supplying a popular base to Radical Republicanism, helped inspire Lincoln's decision for Black emancipation. The women were right: the war could be won on no other basis.
- Despite its ultimate failure, Harrington writes that we ought to see utopian socialism as a significant representation of theorizing socialism that was openly feminist, interracialist, and based on community (which is to say bottom-up) – it thus anticipates the kind of democratic socialism (social democracy) of the Twentieth Century.

SPIRITUALISM, THE AMERICAN SOCIALISM

- Fourierism, the first socialism to gain a major public following in America, kindled attention among Transcendentalist intellectuals and New York's powerful reform journalists but drew its main body from artisans of strong Protestant sentiment. Local ministers
- became the first milltown critics of exploitation, their women parishioners the shock troops for shorter hours and child labor reform. Artisan-linked movements and occasional third-party efforts stressed the dignity of labor and its social value; they also linked workers' rights to the salvation of the republic—a republic, that is, of producers.
- Whether and how the dreamed-of republic might accommodate Blacks remained less clear. Radst sentiments outside the South were deeply embedded among the competitors for jobs and tolerable housing. White artisans sought to exclude Blacks for the same reasons, and sometimes in the same ways, that they sought to exclude women.
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EDWARD BELLAMY'S LOOKING BACKWARD

- The most important American radical writer of the nineteenth century, **Edward Bellamy**, had only a passing acquaintance with Marxism before the publication of his monumental *Looking Backward (1888)*. But he must be regarded as a key precipitator of Marxism among the native-born, explicator of a particular Yankee reform version of Socialism, and himself the transitional figure from antebellum perfectionism to Debsian Socialism.
- His earlier writings are notable for then-Spiritualist flavor, their determination to explore psychic transformation alongside social transformation, and their salvation of the lost man through the redeeming power of the all-knowing woman.
- In *Looking Backward*, an ordinary middle-class American from the late nineteenth century awakens in a Utopian future where all the social problems have been resolved through a cooperative partnership. All the elements of potential happiness can be seen already in the time-traveler's own day; only a rational approach and a sense of Christian brotherhood are missing.
- This kind of social transformation, couched in class reconciliation and the security-blanket of middle-class propriety, immediately struck a chord in an America shaken by the Haymarket events of 1886 and not likely to embrace a full-blown Marxism. Thousands of craft workers destined to join the Socialist Party had their introduction to Socialism through Bellamy's pages. Tens of thousands of others—the 'great Mid west of the American mind' in its idealistic variant—kept Bellamy on their bookshelves, voted Democratic or Republican, and pondered just a little the thought that Capitalism might possibly not be the best of all systems.

NINETEENTH CENTURY TAKEAWAYS



- The end of the nineteenth century, partly brought on by the low cost of paper and partly brought on by the immense amount of support for labor unionism as a solution to the woes of industrial life, was filled with socialist sentiment. There were socialist newspapers in which reading lists were published, socialist kids' magazines to bring up your children in the movement, and by-and-by the town halls of towns across the midwest became labor union locals meetings.
- The proliferation of labor unions and confederations of labor unions becomes the background for what is today the AFL-CIO, a federation of unions.
- It is worth noting that many of the socialists in these movements saw socialism as a substantive option for altering the day-to-day of America. The land of freedom, liberty, and social mobility was impossible so long as monopoly capitalism existed. This, we ought to agree, is not a form of government overthrow so much as it is the use of socialist ideology and community groups to reform the pro-industrialist corruption that persisted throughout the Gilded Age.
 - Proof of this preference for reformism is in the popularity of someone like Theodore Roosevelt, whose populist party spoke to the everyman issues – and, more than anything, wished to break up monopolized industries. In this way, socialist ideas inspire *more* competition, not less (as is often prescribed to Communist countries).
- The roadway from the Populists, the Knights of Labor, and the craft unions through the dark valleys of the severe 1890s depression illuminated the future possibilities for democratic transformation. Socialism became the dominant option in a serious and popular sense for the first time, to the degree that it embodied the combined legacy of previous radicalisms and carried them forward. Railroad man, reformer and sentimentalist, Eugene Victor Debs epitomized these possibilities, and he effectively dramatized the necessity for Socialism through his own heroic failures to change the system from within.

NEXT CLASS...

May 27 – The Debs Era

Perhaps the most famous socialist in American history is Eugene V. Debs, the labor reformer who ran for president on the socialist ticket - even from jail. This era was also the era of the first red scare in American history, in which thousands of Jewish immigrants (including Emma Goldman) were deported for their affiliation with radicalism.

- Ch. 3 "Marxism in the Debs Era" from *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul Buhle
- Ch 7 "Socialism and America" from Bhaskar Sunkara's *The Socialist Manifesto*
-