



OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

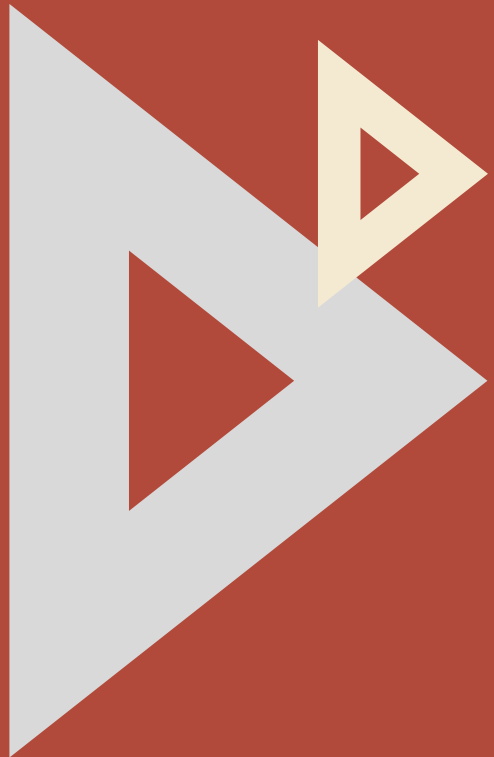
MARXISM IN AMERICA

History, Theory, Culture

OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2

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- A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide, consisting of several overlapping triangles. A large light blue triangle points to the right. Overlapping its top edge is a smaller yellow triangle pointing right. Overlapping its bottom edge is a medium blue triangle pointing right. The intersection of these triangles creates a red triangular shape in the center.
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

The Big Bad "S" Word



RECAP

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. 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. 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.

Socialism became the dominant option in a serious and popular sense for the first time

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.

THE DEBS ERA

BUHLE

There has never been a time of labor activism/socialist fervor in American history besides the Debs Era

Along with the IWW (International Workers of the World, or the Wobblies), the Debsian Socialist Party has no equal in American radicalism. Together they reflect the capacity of the left to identify and equate with itself the key symbols from both historical sides of the great social transition: honest producers of the agrarian, republican past and cosmopolitan worker-intellectuals of the technological, multi-cultural future. In probing the secrets of full-blown capitalism based upon advanced heavy industry, state regulation and a vast consumer market, they interwove for a moment the immigrant and home grown strains long incompatible. They also faced up to the emergence of the United States as the dominant military-industrial power in the world. Tragically, they ran out of time, out of strategy, and out of forces before they could consolidate permanent social bases.

SEEING AMERICAN SOCIETY DIALECTICALLY

BUHLE

American Social Transformations (dialectical shifts)

- The **first grand transformation of American society**, sweeping aside the pre-industrial order with its moral economy of relatively autonomous craft labor, subsistence or labor exchange farming and close family units, had called the Socialists' home grown predecessors into being. Utopians, labor reformers, even militant temperance advocates had sought to broaden the terms of individual freedom while resisting the social implications of total market domination. Socialists offered several constituencies their last chance to defend imperiled ways of life.
- The second transformation, coordinating Fordist mass production with a burgeoning 'culture industry', provoked the younger generation to attempt to make new cultural sense of the opportunities created by the objective force of the market. The expansion of the domestic labor market to a hitherto unimaginable size and variety also brought radical responses from forces wholly new to us society and the American left. While struggling to save their cultures, the new immigrants also sought to place themselves in the modern order where they worked, lived and suffered.
- Underlying all these new developments was the search for a vision adequate to incorporate the central concerns of Marxism into the emergent realities of the twentieth century. Which is to say: comprehending the integration of the wage system into the advanced consumer capitalism of the West, and the development of industrial conflict within the global contradictions of capitalism.

THE ART OF HUGO GELLERT

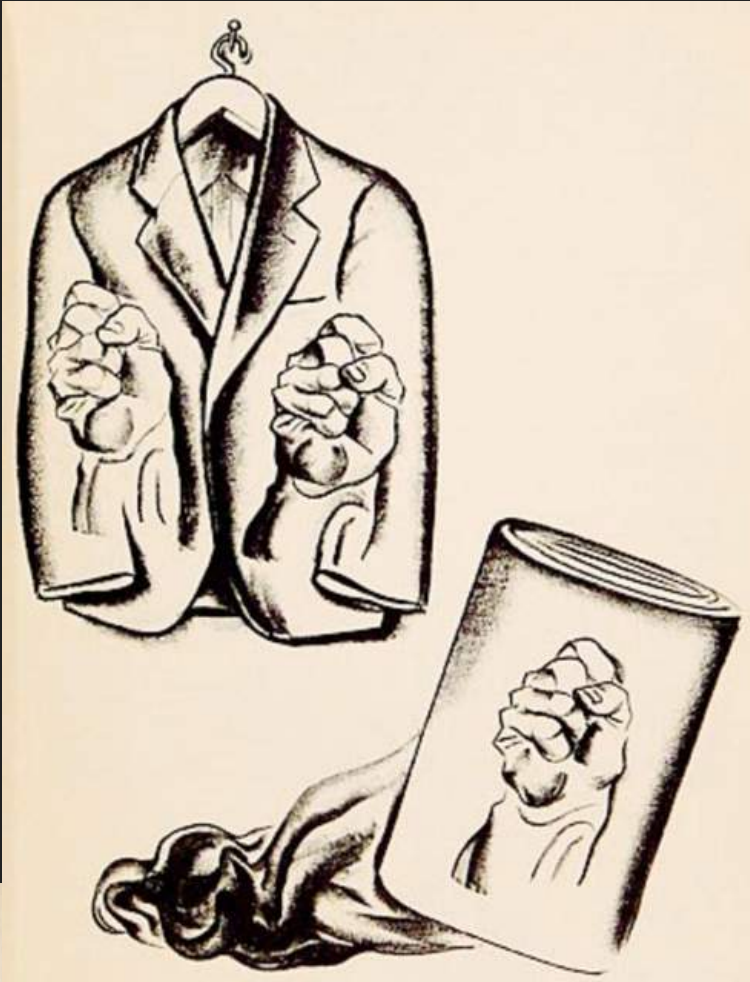
BUHLE, GELLERT



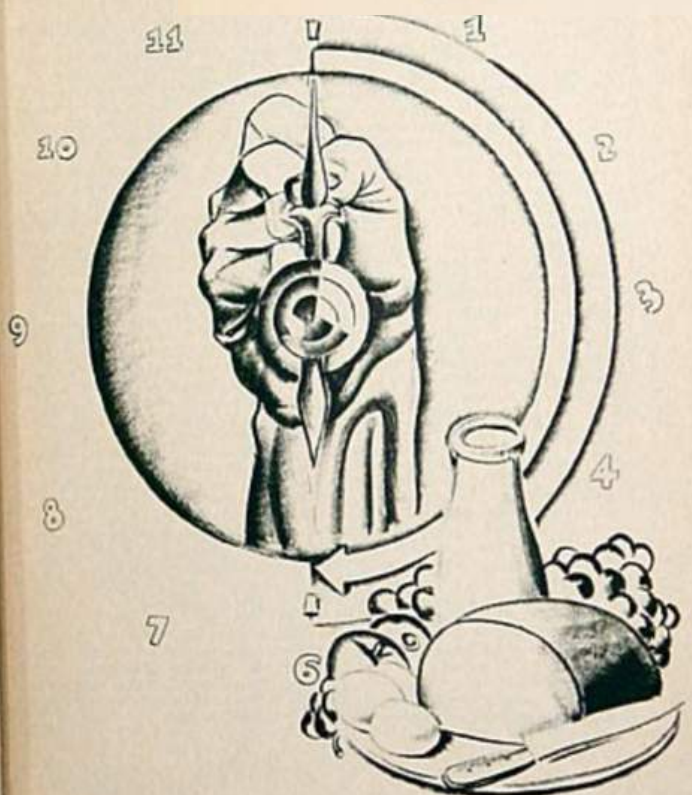
- "The colonial system, national debt, and heavy burden of taxation, protection, commercial wars, and so on--these offspring of the manufacturing period properly so-called--grew luxuriantly during the childhood of large-scale industry. The birth of the latter was celebrated by a massacre of the innocents; or by its counterpart, a systematic kidnapping of children...The cotton industry, while introducing child slavery into England, gave at the same time an impetus towards the transformation of the slave system of the United States, which had hitherto been a more or less patriarchal one, into a commercial system of exploitation. Speaking generally, the veiled slavery of the European wage earners became the pedestal of unqualified slavery in the New World. So much pains did it cost to establish the 'eternal natural laws' of the capitalist method of production, to complete the divorce of the workers from the means of labor, to transform at one pole the social means of production and the social means of subsistence into capital, while transforming at the other pole the masses of the population into wage workers, into free "laboring poor", that artificial product of modern history."
- As an artist, Hugo Gellert recognized instinctively that consumer capitalism had seized upon the fluid motion of modernity and had placed its message in the public eye, a message that the old Socialist leaflets no longer could adequately express. As a Marxist, he reflected upon the contradictions that capitalism now presented to the left.

THE ART OF HUGO GELLERT

BUHLE, GELLERT



- **commodity fetishism** - Marx theorized in Capital that all things produced by labor have an aura (or 'fetish'), a kind of magic, that makes us forget labor created the commodity's value; this theory is called the labor theory of value and was not first written by Marx, but it is Marx who coins commodity fetishism as that quality of commodities whereby we do not see an item and think of what labor went into producing its value to us (use-value, its ability to be used, as well as its exchange-value, its ability to be exchanged for something of equal value). This Gellert refers to as 'embodied' value.
- **surplus value** - each time we sell our labor, we had previous to this action entered into contract with a boss for a specific price of our labor (say, \$1 per hour for a total of \$12 per day). Yet, the things we produce in 12 hours are worth greater than the value for which we have sold our labor to the boss (say, \$200 worth of items we produced in a day). The difference between these values — that value of the things we produce in a given time and the value we have charged for our labor in the same time — is surplus profit. Surplus value is the hours for which we worked for free. Essentially, once we have created \$12 worth of products, we had completed our work for the day — yet, we kept working because the day was not finished. The remainder of the time we worked from the moment our labor produced a value of \$12, we were working for free. Marxists write that this is 'wage slavery' insofar as capitalism has placed time worked rather than value produced as significant to our wages. This avoids paying what we are worth and instead pays us for our time working.



TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICA

- Consider the anonymous Wobbly, native-born or Italian, Slavic, even Mexican by origin, who considered himself a 'bird of flight', in ceaseless movement back and forth across oceans and borders. For this self-taught philosopher in work clothes with an ongoing mental dialogue in several languages and half a dozen cultures, the very notion of a single national conflict, or a fixed hierarchy of skills and ethnic traits signifying leadership in Socialist or Communist movements, seemed absurd. He took Marx seriously, but Marxism—as then constituted—less so. Doctrine, organizational practice, had yet to be reformulated to suit his taste. He had figured out what the most brilliant of the parliamentary Socialists (including those who would become Communist leaders) did not know: that only by staying ahead of the Fordist strategy of connecting wages and consumption, by refusing the single identity of the 'home guard' worker in the conservative-minded union of the future, could he pose a revolutionary alternative.
- Consider the young Black male or female who by virtue of family background and education knew not only about W.E.B. DuBois but had also heard, in the late 1910s, of Marcus Garvey and the Russian Revolution. Black nationalism and internationalism seemed to have torn a hole in the web of repression. The world beckoned for Black culture and Black politics. The streets of Kansas City, or Chicago, or above all Harlem, became cosmopolitan centers for unprecedented possibilities. Social movements he or she observed would be judged to the degree to which they recognized Black liberation in the fullest sense.
- A loosely-organized democratic movement could encompass these diverse elements; no movement could make them all the essence of its being. What else could a mass socialist movement be in a nation of an unstable, bitterly divided and in its organized part, privileged and often conservative proletariat?

MARXIST VOCAB

- **bourgeois revolution** — a revolution that establishes a bourgeoisie (ruling) class; often called a democratic revolution or capitalist revolution, as it establishes an elite class of educated secularists rather than a royal monarchy vested in the church/divine right
- **petty bourgeoisie** — those who exist below the ruling class (bourgeoisie) of a capitalist society insofar as they do not control or own capital; however, they hope to one day be able to do this; they often see themselves as conservative allies to the ruling elite
- **economism** — the reduction of all difference among social groups into economic difference; the belief that all differences in society can be boiled down to one difference, a difference of economic class (as opposed to gender, race, sexual orientation, etc).
- **Fordism** – named after Henry Ford, this refers to a set of strategies employed by Ford to bolster a new white 'middle class' in the U.S.; specifically, Ford offers salaries to his employees that are large enough for them to buy Ford cars (which would essentially be giving Ford money in exchange for the feeling of being included in the middle class social status); a microeconomic element of the Fordist strategy would be the introduction of a managerial bureaucracy in the business that oversees on-the-ground workers and the introduction of an assembly line (which allows for net-lower wages since workers are paid to do the same action ad nauseam rather than paid for a larger set of skills they may or may not possess)
- **Orthodox Marxism** — the first generation of Marxists after Marx/Engels develop a theoretical praxis of the ideas of the duo that is referred to today as the tendency of Orthodox Marxism; it promotes economic determinism/economism, a rejection of reformism (prefers revolutionary displacement of capitalist economy), the notion that all governments are beholden to the ruling class, Marxism *as a science*, and the development of a pre-revolution independent workers' movement with educational structures and a political party that acts as a majority

▶ BHASKAR SUNKARA, "SOCIALISM AND AMERICA"



- Ferdinand Lassalle, a former social democrat and philosopher/activist in Germany, inspired an entire tendency on the left called Lassallism. The ideology differed from Orthodox Marxism in that Orthodox Marxism argues for the creation of a class base made up of workingmen's groups, activist circles, and educational, political parties/organizations whereas Lassallism advocated the use of the state to bring about socialism. This is sometimes called **state socialism** and is today associated with the likes of the USSR, especially Stalinism, and the People's Republic of China (PRC).
 - To be clear, what Lassalle advocated for was **not** the massacre of those with whom one does not agree or even a one-party system of governance. Instead Lassalle believed that electoralism (the use of the democratic process) was the preferred method to bring about social change whereas Orthodox Marxists believed that this was impossible. Orthodox Marxists believed, on the other hand, that reform only delayed the inevitable: a removal of capitalist accumulation and replacement by socialist redistributive government.
- The Workingmen's Party (1876) was largely separated along the lines of Orthodox Marxists and Lassalleans. While the Marxists preferred the unionizing efforts of someone like Debs or even Marx himself, Lassalleans wanted to build a political party funded by the governed to elect socialists.

▶ BHASKAR SUNKARA, "SOCIALISM AND AMERICA"



- Though the media stoked fears about anarchistic and communist violence, it was private employer militias and state terror that made America's nineteenth-century labor history more violent than Europe's. This violence undid the loosely organized Knights of Labor and encouraged craft unionists such as American Federation of Labor (AFL) founder Samuel Gompers to endorse "class harmony" and incremental reforms.
- At a time when American capitalism was pushing forward, **deskilling** workers and incorporating more and more people into the factory system, attempts to organize unskilled labor were in retreat.
- The **Populist** Movement sprang from the 1870s struggles of indebted farmers in central Texas but soon spread throughout the country. As the price of cotton collapsed and the economy entered a depression in the 1890s, the Populists fervently supported Debs during the **Pullman Strike**,

backed many demands made by labor, and were leading tenant and sharecropper efforts against the crop-lien system.

- The Pullman Strike was a labor strike that occurred in the midwest that disrupted all railway traffic from June-July 1894 throughout the region. It resulted from Pullman Palace Car Company (manufacturer of railway cars) cutting wages by 25% after the 1893 Depression without also decreasing rent costs in the towns owned by the company and inhabited by the railway workers.
- American Railway Union (ARU), headed by Eugene V. Debs, brought the issue to the national convention that year and the ARU voted to boycott: refuse to handle any cars made by Pullman or trains with Pullman cars.

BHASKAR SUNKARA, "SOCIALISM AND AMERICA"

- In 1892, the Populist movement formed a national political party around a progressive platform that called for a *graduated income tax, nationalized railways, debt relief, and public works to combat unemployment*. Planter elites responded with a campaign of electoral fraud and violence, including the lynching of hundreds of organizers, while the **Democratic Party** came to co-opt much of the movement's platform in 1896.
- After the pro-Populist Democrat **William Jennings Bryan**'s election loss that year, the movement fell apart. Legislative efforts to disenfranchise blacks through poll taxes and biased "literacy tests" were expanded, helping prevent another multiracial movement from emerging for decades.
- In the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century, the Workingmen's Party became the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) - distinct from the Socialist Party of America (SP), which had been formed by members leaving the Workingmen's Party and uniting with members of the Social Democratic Party of America (SDP).
 - As you might be able to tell already, the left in the US became extremely sectarian. This is something that both Engels and, later, Lenin abhorred on the left. **Sectarianism** is the obsessive allegiance to one particular tendency or interpretation of so-called 'doctrine.' Many of the greatest leaders on the left bitterly disagreed with each other on a variety of things, including interpreting Marx and how to go about making a socialist America. This sectarianism plagues the left until today.
- In Sunkara's words: "What made the United States exceptional at the start of the nineteenth century was its abundance of land (allowing small producers to be more self-sufficient) and the relative egalitarianism that prevailed among white men. But by the end of it, industrial capitalism had created conditions similar to those in other capitalist countries. The nation remained exceptional, however, in the extreme level of state and private violence directed at the workers' movement. Sectarianism, failed unionization strategies, ethnic and racial divisions—all played a role in the disorganization of the country's working class, but the threat of violent repression seems paramount."

▶ THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF AMERICA (SP)

- With the founding of the Socialist Party of America (SP) in 1901, the movement finally had its big tent. The most famous of the party's founders, Eugene V. Debs, was a leading labor organizer who had been radicalized while serving a six-month term in prison after the Pullman Strike. Like many socialists of his era, he was inspired by German social democracy. As he put it, “the writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped, not merely his argument, but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance.”
- Victor Berger—an Austrian who knew Kautsky personally and had been organizing in Milwaukee—visited Debs in jail, left him a copy of Marx's *Capital*, and “delivered the first impassioned message of Socialism [Debs] had ever heard.” Together they created an organization they called Social Democracy of America in 1897, which a year later became the Social Democratic Party of America (SDP). Only a few years after that, they were joined by dissidents from the SLP, including Morris Hillquit, a Jewish immigrant who settled in New York, in forming the **Socialist Party**.
- J.A. Wayland's tagline of his first radical newspaper, *The Coming Nation*, proclaimed it to be “for a government of, by, and for the People as outlined in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, abolishing the Possibility of Poverty.” It offered a mix of republicanism, “nationalism,” and radical populism.



DEBS WITH THE IWW

- For its part, the IWW did make an impact. Actions such as the 1912 textile workers' strike in Lawrence and the 1913 Paterson silk strike galvanized tens of thousands. But tellingly the organization didn't institutionalize those gains or create a functioning bureaucracy, refusing to even set up permanent strike funds.
- In 1912, the IWW had fourteen thousand members in Lawrence—a year later, it had less than a thousand. Unions, after all, need to deliver steady economic gains for their members through transactional bargaining, and their political activity can complement, but not replace, the more visionary political work of a political party. There was a reason successful left movements were all patterned on a version of this “sword” and “shield” division.
- The IWW's sectarian attitude toward even other left-wing unions and the Socialist Party caused Debs to leave in 1908. He complained that “the IWW for which Haywood stands and speaks is an anarchist organization in all except in name, and this is the cause of all the trouble. Anarchism and Socialism have never mixed and never will.”
- Regardless of whatever debates arose, Debs remained the heart of the SP. In his speeches, he somehow managed to synthesize populism, the messianic rhetoric of Christianity, **Western syndicalism**, and Marxist socialism into a coherent whole. Like Wayland, his moral case for socialism found a wide audience. But Debs never presented a clear political strategy to go along with this shared rhetoric.
- American socialism spoke in a variety of idioms, and even in different languages, and was more of a coalition than a unified force. It helped that it was operating in a country as geographically large, and as regionally divided, as the United States.

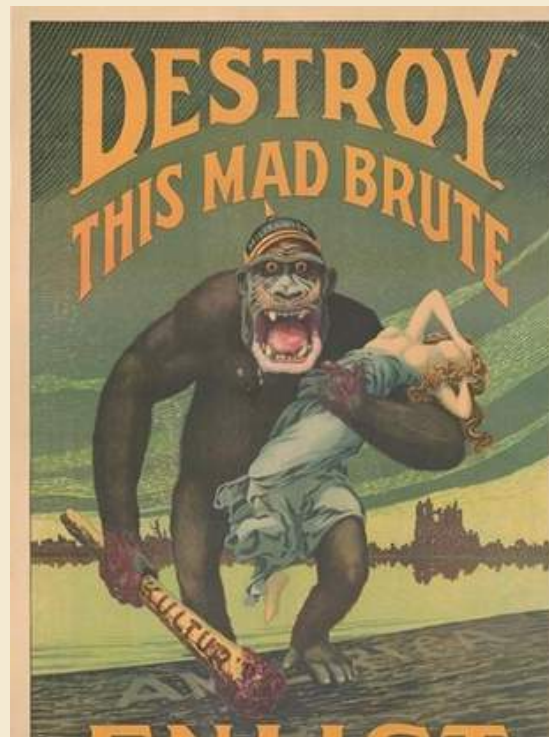
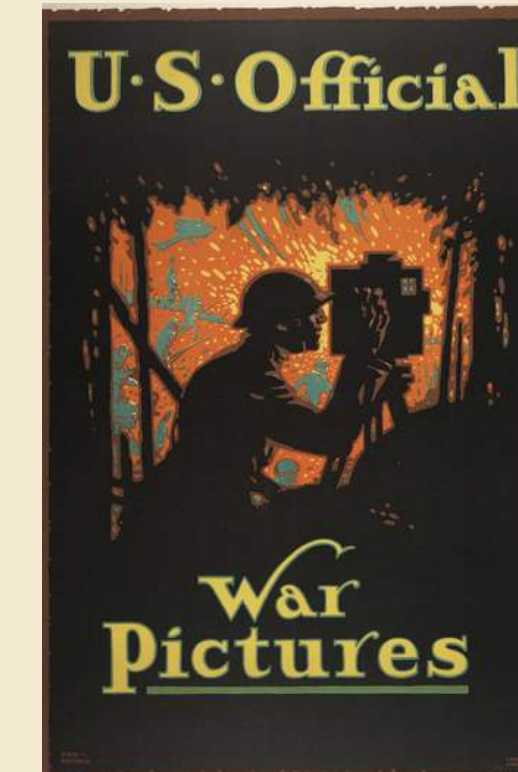
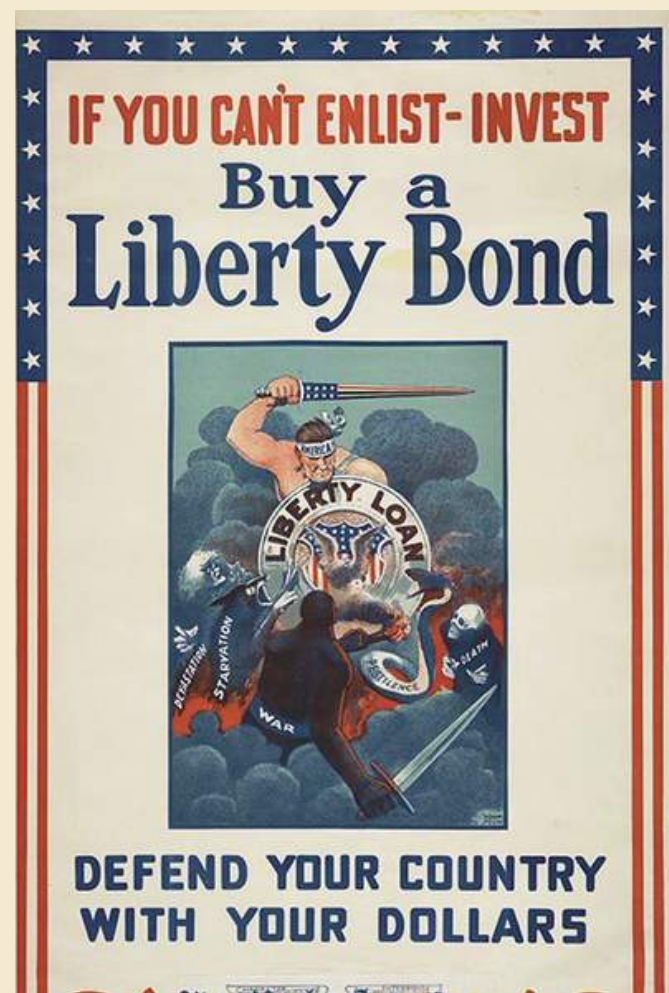
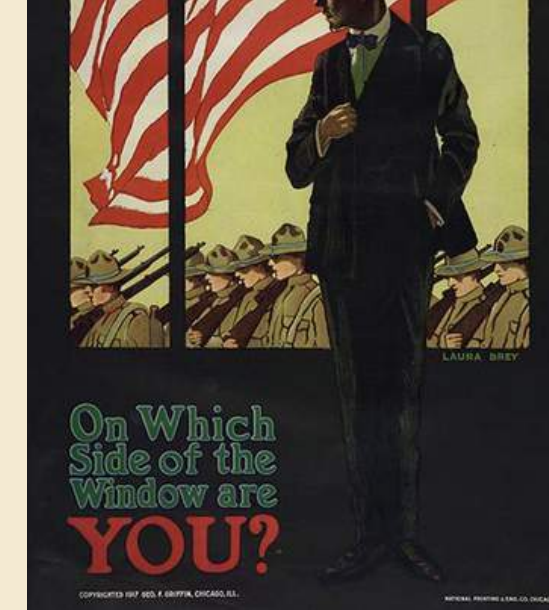
DEBS FOR PREZ

- For his 1908 presidential campaign, Debs toured the country on a train called the Red Special, and repeated the effort in 1912, when he spoke to more than five hundred thousand people. The Socialists revived the encampments of the Populist days, which resembled Protestant revival meetings. They often lasted for an entire week, as thousands rolled in on covered wagons, picked up socialist literature, and listened to the gospel of the **Cooperative Commonwealth**.
- Debs ended up with 901,551 votes in 1912, almost a half million more than his showing in 1908. The party polled in the double-digits in more than a half-dozen states. Today, we view these results as the high point of the Socialist movement.
- When the US government cracked down on the party for its antiwar activities, starting with the 1918 Espionage and Sedition Acts and the barring of socialist papers from the postal service, the party's right was certainly not spared. Berger became the United States' first Socialist congressman in 1910, but even his moderate socialism was too much for the government. In March 1918, he was indicted under the Espionage Act and charged with twenty-six "disloyalty acts." The House voted 309 to 1 to deny him his democratically won seat.
- Many more elected officials met a similar fate, and thousands of SP members were arrested or deported. Such was the scale and success of the repression that few today remember that the Oklahoma Socialist Party was among the most important political organizations in the state. For his part, Debs once again found himself in prison, delivering his most famous address at his sentencing: "Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."
- in the nine years between 1903 and 1912, the SP's membership grew sevenfold, despite all the internal battles. The party now had twelve hundred elected officials across the country. The Socialists drew strength from the same broad current of reform that powered the growing Progressive movement and also informed Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose party and Woodrow Wilson's Democrats. The Socialist Party appealed to voters not by articulating a clear vision of socialism or how to achieve it, but by expressing anger at the status quo and calling for improvements in public health, taxation, and education and an end to corruption. Yet with its message co-opted by other reformers, no doubt thousands who were inspired by Debs or SP local efforts voted for more viable candidates for national office instead of Socialists.

THE FIRST RED SCARE

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- Debs ran for president from a Georgia prison in 1920, winning 3.41 percent of the vote. But by that time the party he represented had already split. Its revolutionary wing had grown, fueled by the arrival of Russian and Finnish workers, among others. With the Left on pace to win commanding majorities at the 1919 conference, the party's right began sweeping purges. As many as two-thirds of the membership were banned from the party, with many of them going on to form the nucleus of American communism.

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION



▶ THE PALMER RAIDS



THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 1920.

TWO CENTS Metropolitan District 90 Mile Station

**REDS RAIDED IN SCORES OF CITIES;
2,600 ARRESTS, 700 IN NEW YORK;
DEPORTATION HEARINGS BEGIN TODAY**

RAIDS ON 13 CENTRES HERE

Federal Officers Seize

*Raiders Ordered to Make Cleanup Thorough;
Warned Against Violence or Taking Valuables*

RAID FROM COAST TO COAST

Secret Service Men



NEXT CLASS...

June 3 - Leninism in America

After the Russian Revolution is successful in creating the USSR, leadership of the one-party revolutionary government such as Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, and Leon Trotsky become increasingly popular theorists of Marxism's abilities/inabilities. In the U.S., leaders turned to the only 'successful' workers revolution in the world for guidance.

- Ch. 4 "Leninism in America" from *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul Buhle
- Ch 5 "'Simply a Stupid Piece of Despotism': How Socialists Saved the First Amendment" from *The "S" Word: A Short History of an American Tradition...Socialism* by John Nichols
- Ch. 5 "Negroes Ain' Black-But Red!: Black Communists and the Culture of Opposition" from *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* by Robin D.G. Kelley
- Podcast: "History of the IWW: Militant Unionism, Wobblie Internationalism, & Class War" and "Black Bolshevik: The Life of Harry Haywood" from *Revolutionary Left Radio*