

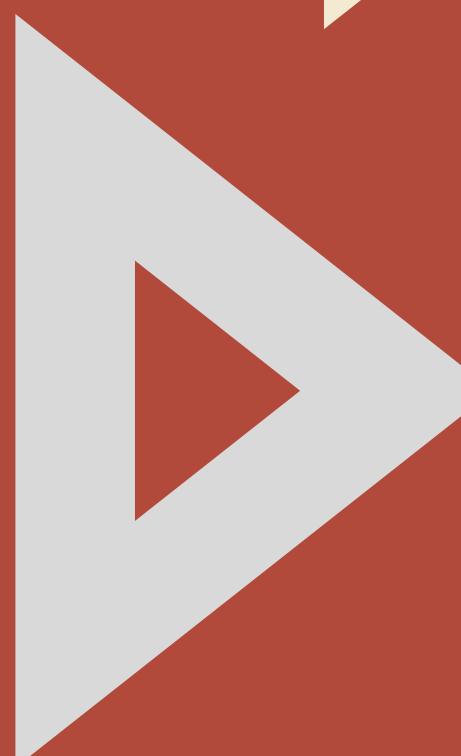


OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

# 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

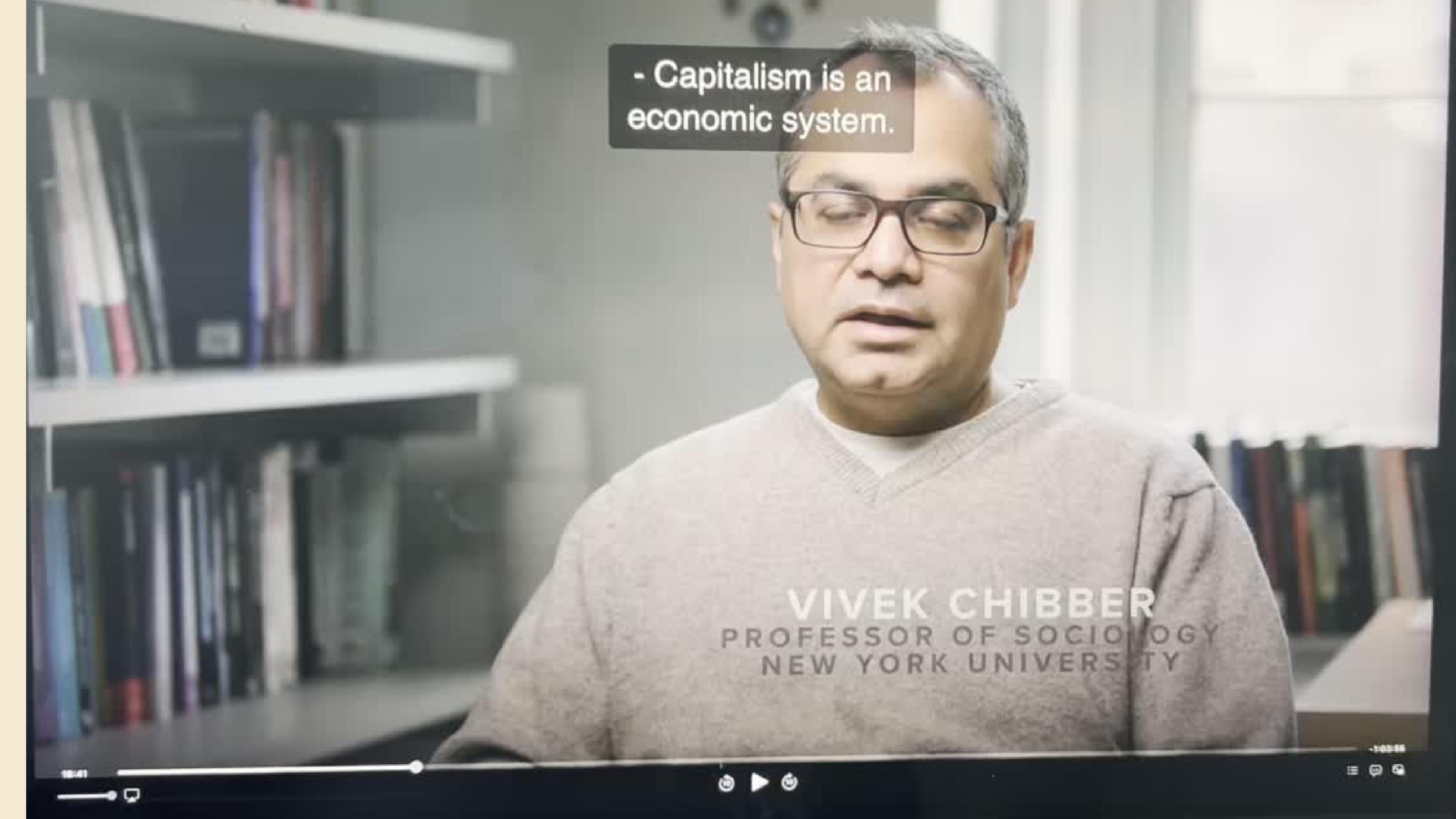
# RECAP

## **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).

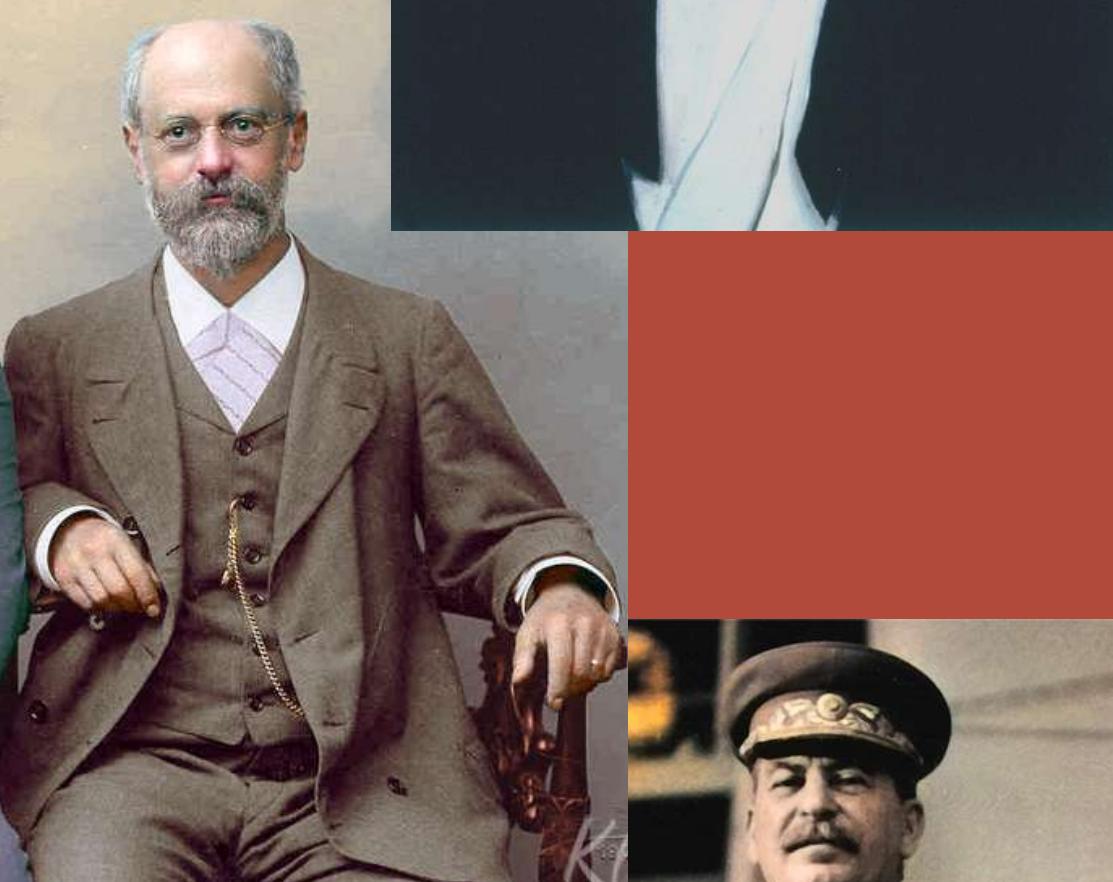
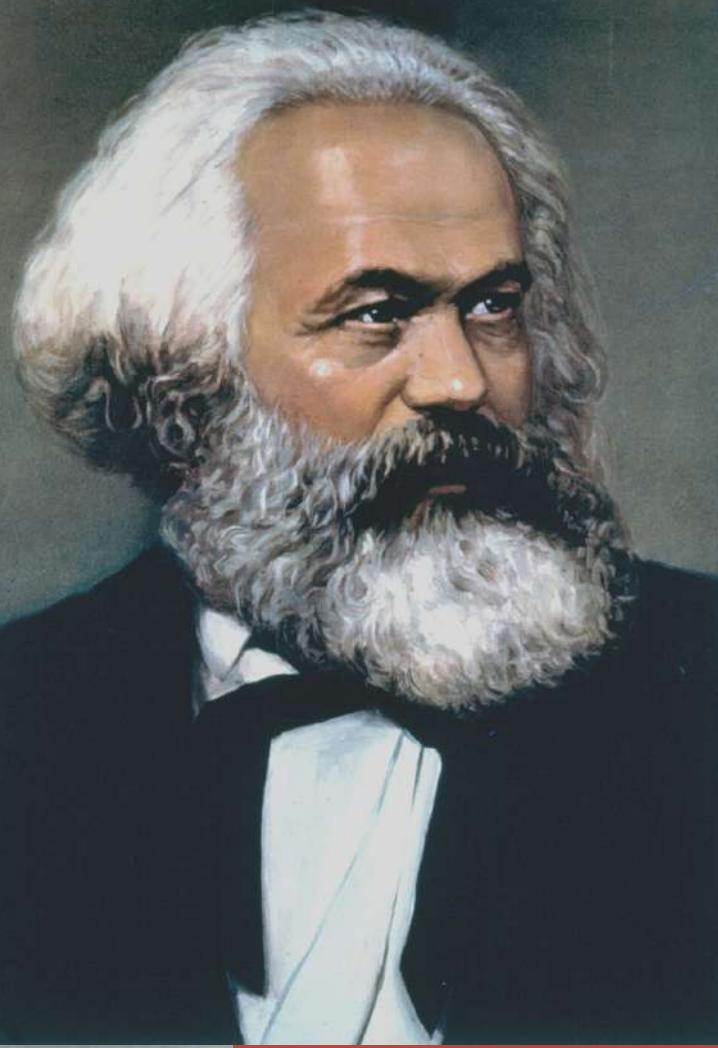


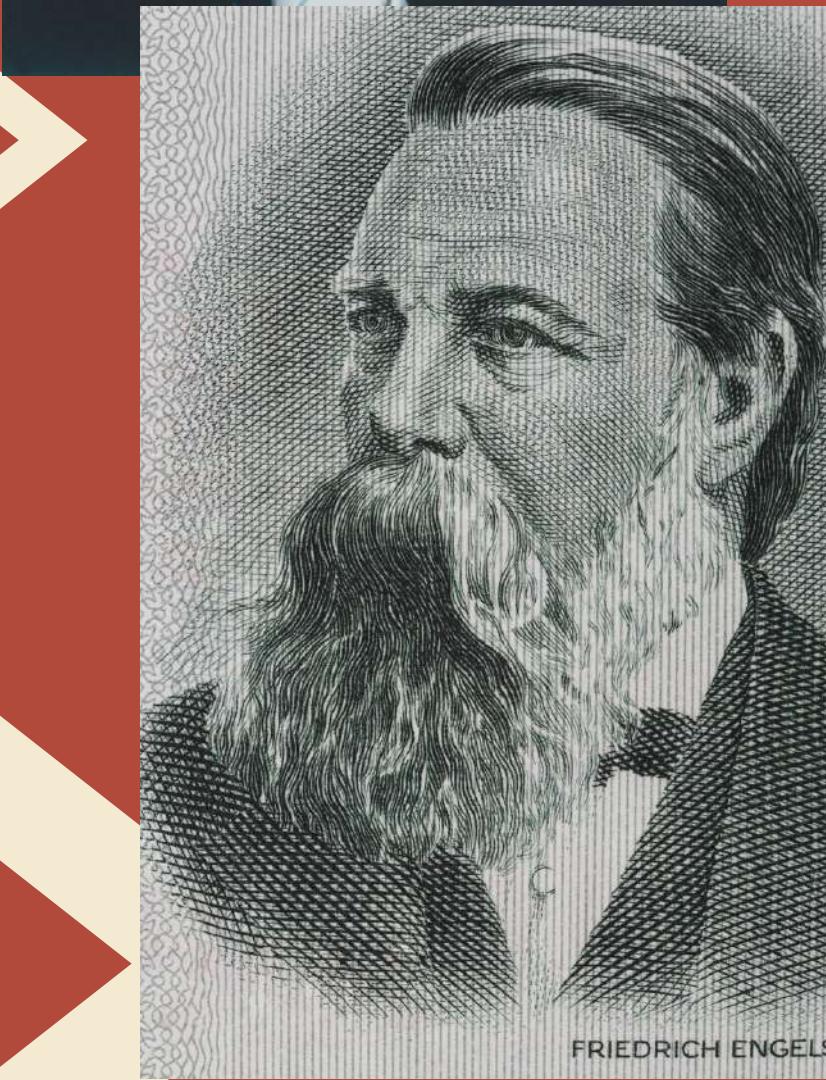
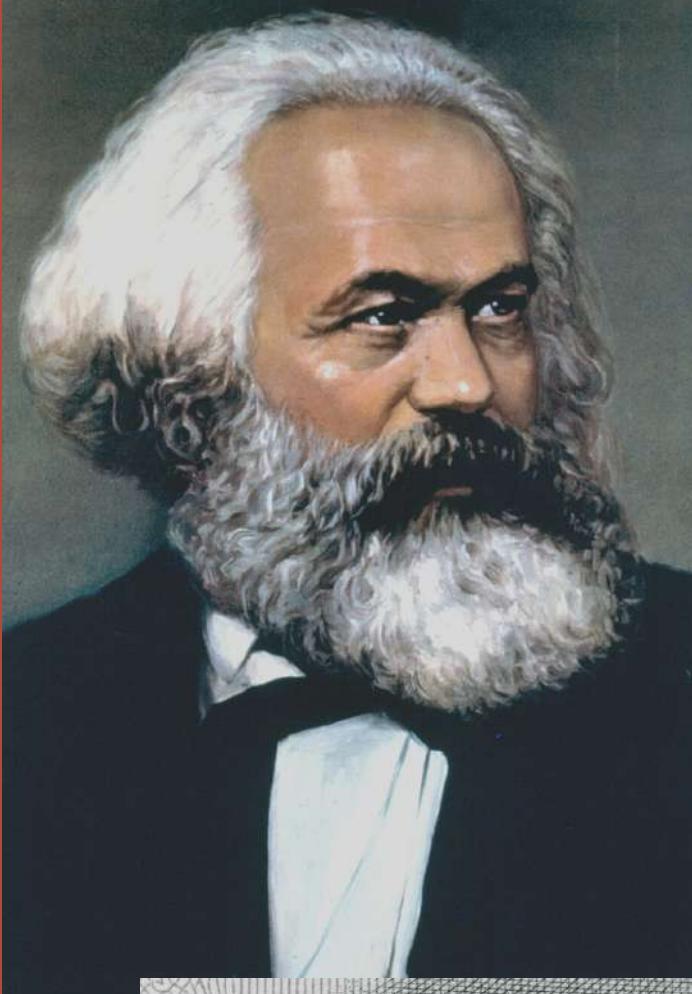
- Capitalism is an economic system.

VIVEK CHIBBER  
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY  
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# MATERIALISM HISTORICAL, DIALECTICAL

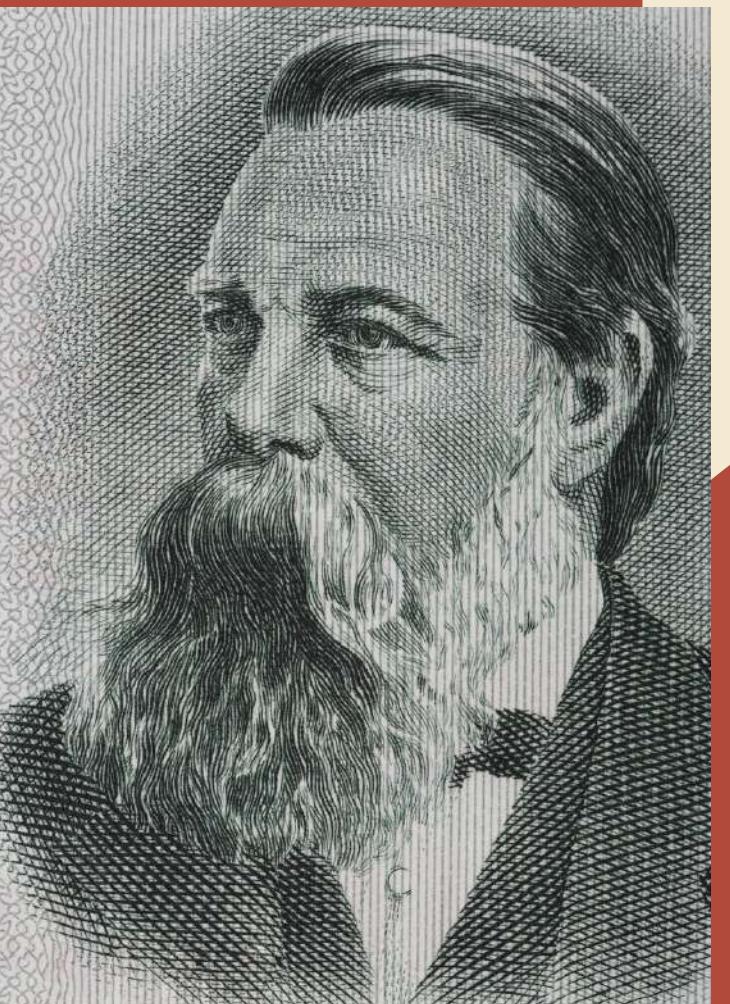
- The "materialist view of history" as Marx wrote about and "historical materialism" that Engels develops after Marx's death are both perspectives on the interpretation of history. This perspective of history holds that what causes historical change is not powerful men (individualist narrative, also called the 'Great Man of History' narrative), it is not the alteration of circumstances while the essence of everything remains constant (Hegelian/German Idealism), but it is material circumstances of groups of people with contradictory goals who, upon realizing this contradiction, duel for power in what are called *revolutions*.
- Marx develops this theory from what existed before him and the traditions of philosophy out of which he was educated: namely, German Idealist thinkers like Hegel and socialist thinkers like Peter Josef Dietzgen. Dietzgen is, from what we know, the first person to use the term "dialectical materialism" after which the Austrian theoretician most associated with Orthodox Marxism Karl Kautsky starts using it. Then, the term makes its way to Russia when Georgi Plekhanov (one of the founders of social democracy in Russia before Lenin/Trotsky Bolshevik faction endorses the theory of **democratic centralism**) describes it in his own writing.
- When Josef Stalin becomes the Gen Sec of the Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) - VKP(b), it becomes part of the central text on Soviet-style Marxism (the tendency called Marxism-Leninism), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, or simply the *Short Course*.





# HOW THE HELL IS SOCIALISM SCIENTIFIC?

- As good students of the Enlightenment, Marx & Engels had always wanted to prove the materialist conception of history to be a scientifically verifiable philosophical standpoint. It remains a philosophy of science, which is to say that it remains a way of suggesting what science is able to prove, deduce, or observe about the world.
- They both always argued that scientific socialism differed from previous versions of *utopian socialism* insofar as the latter depended upon moral authority to create socialist society whereas scientific socialism would use science to prove socialism's objective ability to be sustained. 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.
- So, on the one hand, you have the chief philosophical goal of scientific socialists being to prove that socialism was able to create a sustainable society where capitalism would not while at the same time differentiating itself from other socialisms that rejected capitalism not because of capitalism's unsustainability but because of the moral problems it created (inequality, hierarchical society, poor health/death of some while others profit).
- One of our many questions, then, should be: **does scientific socialism accomplish these two goals? If so, how and where? If not, why?**



# HOW THE HELL IS SOCIALISM SCIENTIFIC?

- As the Twentieth Century unfolds, the hold on objectivity that empiricism holds continues—philosophy, especially metaphysics and idealism (especially Kantian/transcendental idealism) fall out of fashion.
- With Stalin's tenure as General Sec. of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) - VKP(b), his version of delineating between historical materialism and dialectical materialism comes into fashion (although Kautsky and even Marx and Engels likely would have used these terms interchangeably based on preferred emphasis in a given context). Stalin's delineation may not always hold, but for now his version of the two is accepted by most Marxist philosophers:
  - Nature is in a state of qualitative change, contradictions are an inherent part of Nature → Qualitative change occurs through revolution (as opposed to reform).
  - Nature is materialist (only matter), Being is objective (only matter) → socialism, which perfects the sociality of Being through scientific means, is a science.
- In his ***Dialectical and Historical Materialism***, Stalin will (according to some anti-Soviet Marxists) give preference to the CP's ability to correct using its authority—a contradiction, they would argue, to the scientific method.

# JEWISH RADICALS: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY (ED. TONY MICHELS)



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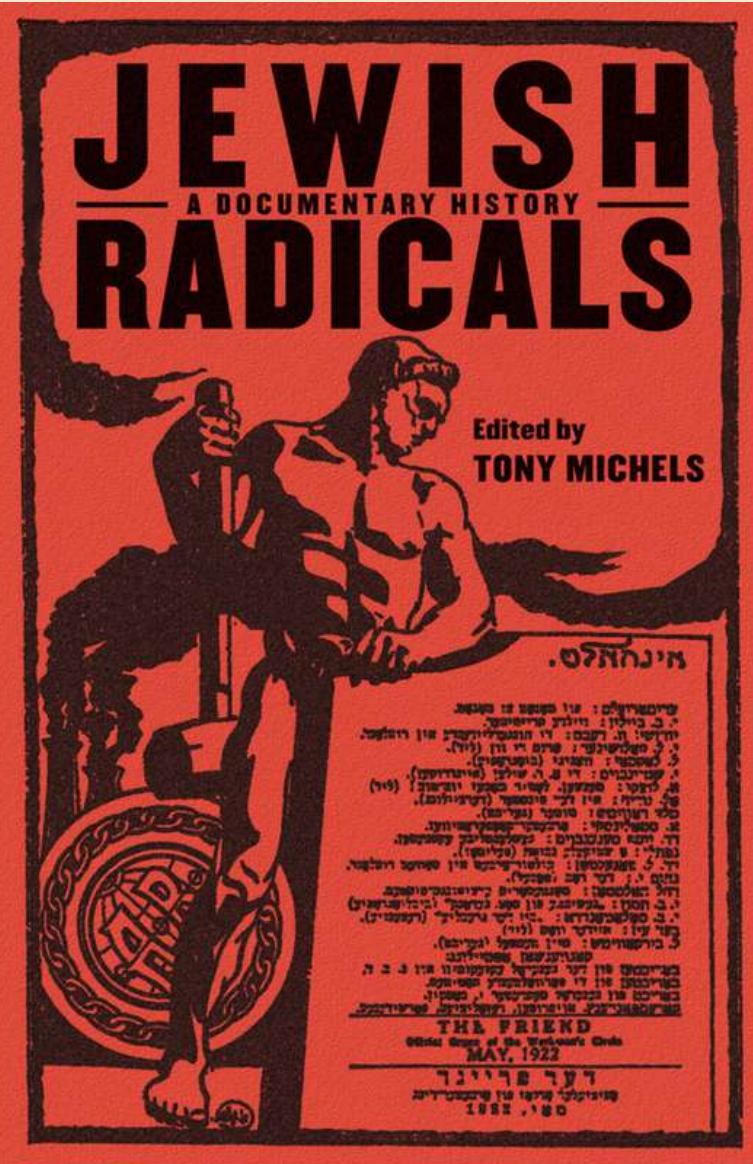
“I Saw a New World Opening Before Me” (memoir; 1931)

Emma Goldman

It was the 15th of August 1889, the day of my arrival in New York City. I was twenty years old. All that had happened in my life until that time was now left behind me, cast off like a worn-out garment. A new world was before me, strange and terrifying. But I had youth, good health, and a passionate ideal. Whatever the new held in store for me I was determined to meet unflinchingly. My entire possessions consisted of five dollars and a small hand-bag. How confusing and endless a large city seems to the new-comer, how cold and unfriendly!

One Sunday it was announced that a famous socialist speaker from New York, Johanna Greie, would lecture on the case then being tried in Chicago. On the appointed day I was the first in the hall. The huge place was crowded from top to bottom by eager men and women, while the walls were lined with police. I had never before been at such a large meeting.

Soon the chairman announced the speaker. She was a woman in her thirties, pale and ascetic-looking, with large luminous eyes. She spoke with great earnestness, in a voice vibrating with intensity. Her manner engrossed me. I forgot the police, the audience, and everything else about me. I was aware only of the frail woman in black crying out her passionate indictment against the forces that were about to destroy eight human lives.



The entire speech concerned the stirring events in Chicago. She began by relating the historical background of the case. She told of the labour strikes that broke out throughout the country in 1886, for the demand of an eight-hour workday. The centre of the movement was Chicago, and there the struggle between the toilers and their bosses became intense and bitter. A meeting of the striking employees of the McCormick Harvester Company in that city was attacked by police; men and women were beaten and several persons killed. To protest against the outrage a mass meeting was called in Hay-market Square on May 4. It was addressed by Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer, and others, and was quiet and orderly. This was attested to by Carter Harrison, Mayor of Chicago, who had attended the meeting to see what was going on. The Mayor left, satisfied that everything was all right, and he informed the captain of the district to that effect. It was getting cloudy, a light rain began to fall, and the people started to disperse, only a few remaining while one of the last speakers was addressing the audience. Then Captain Ward, accompanied by a strong force of police, suddenly appeared on the square. He ordered the meeting to disperse forthwith. "This is an orderly assembly," the chairman replied, whereupon the police fell upon the people, clubbing them unmercifully. Then something flashed through the air and exploded, killing a number of police officers and wounding a score of others. It was never ascertained who the actual culprit was, and the authorities apparently made little effort to discover him. Instead orders were immediately issued for the arrest of all the speakers at the Haymarket meeting and other prominent anarchists. The entire press and bourgeoisie of Chicago and of the whole country began shouting for the blood of the prisoners. A veritable campaign of terror was carried on by the police, who were given moral and financial encouragement by the Citizens' Association to further their murderous plan to get anarchists out of the way. The public mind was so inflamed by the atrocious stories circulated by the press against the leaders of the strike that a fair trial for them became an impossibility. In fact, the trial proved the worst frame-up in the history of the United States. The jury was picked for conviction; the District Attorney announced in open court that it was not only the arrested men who were the accused, but that "anarchy was on trial" and that it was to be exterminated. The judge repeatedly denounced the prisoners from the bench, influencing the jury against them. The witnesses were terrorized or bribed, with the result that eight men, innocent of the crime and in no way connected with it were convicted. The incited state of the public mind, and the general prejudice against anarchists, coupled with the employers' bitter opposition to the eight-hour movement, constituted the atmosphere that favoured the judicial murder of the Chicago anarchists. Five of them—Albert Parsons, August Spies, Louis Lingg, Adolph Fischer, and George Engel—were sentenced to die by hanging; Michael Schwab and Samuel Fielden were doomed to life imprisonment; Neebe received fifteen years' sentence. The innocent blood of the Haymarket martyrs was calling for revenge.

# JEWISH RADICALS: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY (ED. TONY MICHELS)

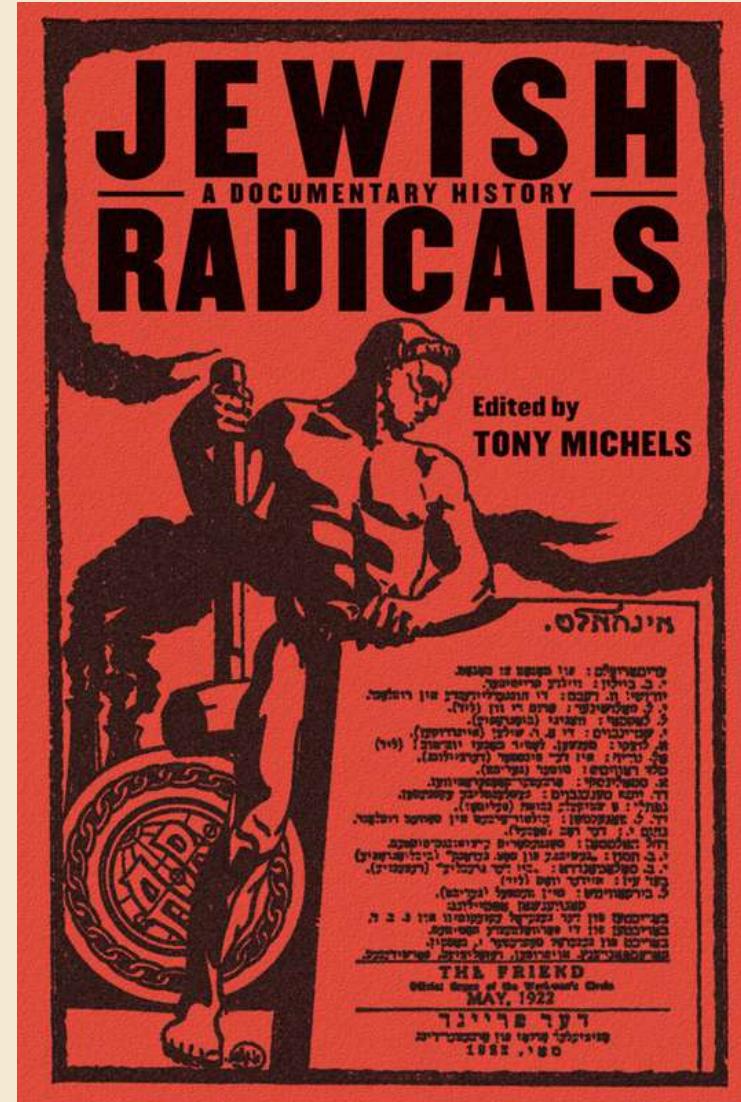
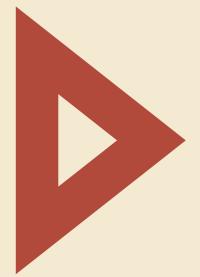
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“Rebellion Raged within Me” (memoir; 1948)

Lucy Robins Lang

A letter came from Chicago in which my Uncle Fox and Aunt Yente Chave stated that Father could get work there. They suggested, however, that he come alone, for they could defray traveling expenses for only one person. Later they would help him to bring the rest of the family. Chaye was called in for consultation, and at once she said that Father must go. She also recommended that I go with him, for then our relatives would have to take steps as quickly as possible to bring Mother and the other children.

Aunt Yente Chave immediately wanted to know why I had been brought to Chicago. She, too, was a matriarch, ruling over a large clan and offering advice to strangers as well as kin. She was capable, and she did much good, but her virtues were overshadowed by her fanatical faith in her own rightness. She had hardly patted my head when she began to scold me. Such a big girl, almost ten years old! I should have had more sense than to come along. For \$4.50 a month Aunt Yente Chave rented rooms for us in the basement of the house on Morgan Street in which she lived, and she also found for us an unsteady table, some lame chairs, a rusty bed, and an ancient sofa. The basement was divided in two, and we lived in the part toward the street. The front room had a barred window, through which we could see only the feet of passers-by and the rats that thronged under the wooden sidewalk. The second room was the kitchen, and in it was a smoky stove. Then there was a half room, like a cave dug into a black cliff, and the bed was placed there, near the windowless wall. The other half of the basement contained the toilet and the coal bins, which were infested with rats as big as cats. When the tenants came to get coal, they had to fight the rats, which fled towards our apartment. Mother, who was very unwell, lived in dread of the rats.



Mother was taking this pregnancy hard. Her beauty and buoyancy, which had survived so many hardships, now began to fade. As soon as Father and I returned from work, she would lie down on the bed in the half room, while we prepared the food and did the dishes. As the time of her labor approached, a doctor was provided through Jane Addam's Hull House. In fear and anguish Mother awaited the event. Father could not afford to miss a day's work, and I stayed at home.

Soon Mother's agonized screams sent me running for the doctor. He came, accompanied by a visiting nurse, and I had to watch carefully everything the nurse did so that I could take over when she left. Despite Mother's outcries, the doctor and the nurse paid little attention to her. Probably they knew that there was plenty of time, but I trembled with exasperation at their seeming indifference. Was it because we were poor immigrants that they treated Mother so callously? Humiliated and outraged, I began to weep, and the younger children followed my example. At last the doctor and nurse approached Mother's bed and in our presence performed the mysterious act of removing a child from its mother's body.

At this same time Uncle Fox's wife, Beckie, was giving birth in the clean, well lit apartment of her mother, Aunt Yente Chave, on the fifth floor. She came from Chicago Avenue to be delivered under her mother's watchful care, and though Aunt Yente Chave was far from rich, she provided all possible conveniences. A private doctor and nurse were engaged, and Aunt Yente Chave's other daughters were on hand to help. The baby and its mother on the fifth floor were tenderly cared for, while in the basement, once the charity doctor and the nurse had departed, the new mother had only her frightened, weeping children.

The celebrations that introduced the babies into the fold of their people and their faith brought added humiliation for the baby in the basement. On the fifth floor there was a dignified ceremony, with a prominent rabbi, many well dressed guests, a table laden with wine, brandy, and home-baked cakes. On the barren table in the basement stood a small bottle of whisky with two tiny glasses, one for Father and the other for the impoverished and unknown mohel who came to perform the ceremony as an act of charity. There was a plate with salted beans, the only dessert after the drink. The wishes of good luck to Mother were voiced only by the half-starved mohel, by Father, whose heart was crying out with shame and pain, and by me, her oldest child, who was feeling the stirrings of revolt against this poverty. The baby on the fifth floor was given an American name, Sydney. Our baby was named Hymie, in good immigrant style, after Grandfather Reb Chaim. When the baby was returned to Mother, she turned her head to the wall so that we should not see her tears.

Rebellion raged within me. Why should others have all the things we didn't have?

# JEWISH RADICALS: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY (ED. TONY MICHELS)

One of the best of my teachers was Tony, an Irishman whose right leg had been amputated above the knee. He had a crude wooden stump, and he carried a crutch, but he was strong and agile, and he refused to admit that he was handicapped in any way. When Chicago welcomed President McKinley and Admiral Dewey, the latter fresh from his triumphs over the Spaniards, we had a half holiday. A little later, when the news came that President McKinley had been shot by an Anarchist named Czolgosz, Tony bitterly denounced the assassin and his associates. The Anarchists were not only disloyal to the country, Tony argued; they hurt the cause of labor. For Tony was both a staunch patriot and a great believer in the rights of workingmen. These two sentiments, as I discovered in time, were not incongruous: only the well paid worker can be a good patriot and a positive force in the life of the nation. As for my own feelings about McKinley's death, they were simpler than Tony's: here was I, a poor greenhorn girl, who had a chance to see the President, and suddenly somebody killed him.

From Rose Aron I learned that there was another side to the story. Her older sisters and their friends were radicals, some of them Anarchists. They regretted that the President had been shot, but they were not bitter against the man who had committed the crime. From Rose I learned how Emma Goldman, whom the police were hunting on a charge of complicity in the shooting, had voluntarily surrendered herself. When I repeated to Tony what Rose had told me about the Anarchists and their ideals, he muttered something about Jewish girls being too radical. It was not so very much later that he married one of these radical Jewish girls, and learned to depend on her vitality and strength.

“Rebellion Raged within Me” (memoir; 1948) by Lucy Robins Lang

### 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.

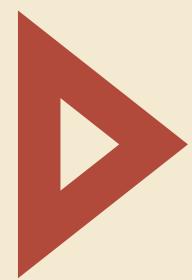
# THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM

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.

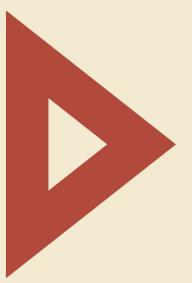
One basic debate involved whether it was more important for the oppressed groups to change themselves or to change the institutions that were oppressing them. This was sometimes phrased as the difference between a cultural strategy and a political strategy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, 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.

# IMMIGRANT SOCIALISM



- Marxism, as an alternative explanation of social ills and as a description of the future good life, offered only a proximate vision of us social realities to these radicals. Lacking the literal sort of class culture and class traditions which reproduced European-style (or better, German-style) social relations, American workers and middle-class reformers of various types interpreted industrial degradation and centralized financial power as rents in the social fabric, proof of the need for still further democratization.
- By contrast, immigrants who experienced the grinding poverty, exploitation and discrimination of the American order found Marxian Socialist ideas authentically helpful in explaining their lives and the world. The presence of age-old class traditions in their own culture, of militants armed with the skills for successful economic and social mobilization, held out to many of them a Socialist pole star as bright and meaningful as that northern light which guided the runaway slaves to freedom.
- Abstractly, assimilation was available to every 'white' immigrant. Some upward mobility can be found in virtually every such population. But especially in the first generation, neither the opportunity nor the expectation was open to the overwhelming majority.
- Marxist analysis admirably fitted the economic reality of these groups. Broadly speaking, the immiseration of the working class assumed real form here in two distinct, albeit related, ways. For groups from Northern Europe generally, the level of acquired skills allowed entry into the us labor market on relatively favorable terms—but only to a degree, and at a heavy cost for many workers. The pace of work, by all reports, proved more taxing than in Europe, the intensity becoming increasingly severe as progressive mechanization and primitive forms of scientific management blossomed. More important, the same modernization pressed upon the skills themselves.
- The recurrent economic crises in the last third of the nineteenth century plunged skilled alongside unskilled into the ranks of the unemployed. In short, the expansion of the economy which drew immigrant workers to American shores more than any appeal to democratic participation, also periodically worsened the condition of those who had the highest expectation of gain. For the unskilled, especially those Eastern Europeans already familiar with factory life prior to immigration. Socialism spoke directly to a sense of class and national oppression.

# IMMIGRANT SOCIALISM



- Printing and building trades, furniture workers and scattered others already organized in the 1850s were joined by a host of trades including cigarmakers, brewery and metal-workers struggling to mobilize in the face of deteriorating economic conditions. Building upon such foundations, linking together unions and community organizations, the immigrants combined the lessons from the old country with the demands imposed by the new. Their ambiguous Socialist doctrine did not make many of them self-conscious 'Marxists' until at least the 1870s. But it made them aware of Karl Marx, and even more aware of the eclectic Socialist movement then sweeping across sections of the German working class.
- Immigrant workers, their families and small property allies were held together politically through speakers and the press, often by the same individual leaders renowned for oratory and editorializing.
- like other immigrant Socialist Intellectuals, they admired Marx's theoretical contribution, which they sought to apply to the local situation confronting them. But the influence of Marx had distinct limits. They had other, sometimes competing loyalties and many non-theoretical obligations.
- Broadly speaking, we may divide nineteenth-century immigrant Socialist efforts into two periods. During the first, from the beginning of Radical Reconstruction to the Great Railroad Rebellion of 1877, a primitive Socialist movement struggled toward institutional existence. The second reaches from the aftermath of the same strike to the Socialist Labor Party in the 1890s, when the foreign-based activists, bolstered by immigrant Jews, attempted unsuccessfully to turn their greater resources into a mass revolutionary agency.
- Throughout most of the 1870s, the question of what Socialists might do in such a situation had been mostly of local concern. At the time of the 1877 strike, the Socialists bitterly regretted they; inability to intervene more decisively, with greater numbers and influence. Decades later, they recalled with amazement how much energy they had managed to mobilize. Organization raced ahead; Socialist literature experienced its first brief golden age as a dozen newspapers came into existence and pamphleteering flourished A new group of American reformers, no longer dominated by the Civil War experience, came into the movement

# NEXT CLASS...

## May 20 - Distinctly American Socialism

In order to be viable as a political outlook, the Marxists in America knew that they would need to adapt the theories from European Marxists to the pervasive religious and cultural beliefs of the U.S. Next week, we'll discuss the utopian socialism in the U.S. throughout the Nineteenth Century, especially spiritualism, transcendentalists, and the Christian socialists.

- Ch. 2 "American Socialism, American Culture" from *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul Buhle
- Ch. 1-3 of *The S Word: A Short History of An American Tradition...Socialism* by John Nichols
- Podcast listens:
  - ["Christian Socialism: The Fusion of Faith and Revolution" from the Revolutionary Left Radio podcast](#)
  - ["Christian Leftist Theory Time with LitCritGuy" from The Magnificast podcast](#)