



OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

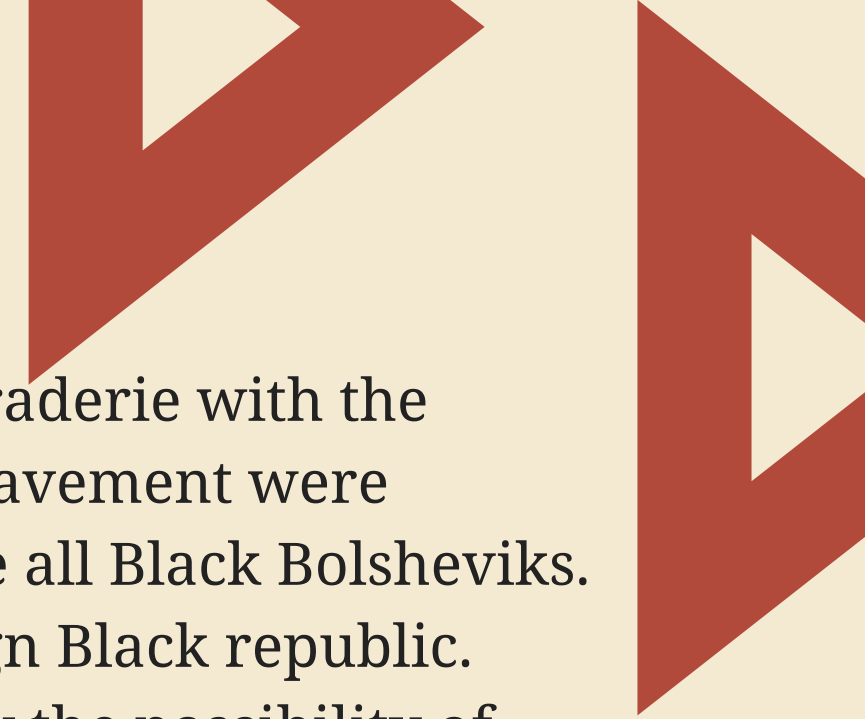
MARXISM IN AMERICA

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 in shades of blue, teal, and yellow, creating a layered, geometric effect.
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 23 – Authoritarian Collectivisms
 7. June 30 – Rise of the Culture Critique (1925-1940)
 8. July 7 – After Leninism (1940-1960)
 9. July 14 – The New Left and Decolonization
 10. July 21 – Neoliberalism and Neocolonialism
 11. July 28 – Visionary Gradualism & Battling the Era of Growing Inequality

RECAP



Black Bolshevism & Alabama Communists

So long as the USSR represents anti-imperialism, the Black and colonized nations of the world feel camaraderie with the Soviets. Particularly in the United States, Black people dealing with Jim Crow laws after centuries of enslavement were especially drawn to the Comintern. Cyril Briggs, Claude McKay, W.E.B. DuBois, and Harry Haywood were all Black Bolsheviks. Haywood envisioned a class revolt throughout the Black Belt in the south that would establish a sovereign Black republic. McKay spoke at the Comintern in 1919 on the necessity of white communists in America to take seriously the possibility of interracial solidarity. Cyril Briggs started the first modern militia dedicated to protecting Black communities. In Alabama, the Communist Party and the International Labor Defense provided leadership opportunities for folks in the Black community who did not see prosperity in following the church or the NAACP - both of which represented some kind of kowtowing to 'the man.' The CP's involvement in Alabama provided opportunities for literacy and respectability should one become so involved they would study at the Communists' schools in Moscow or NYC. Like the trickster character in Af-Am folklore, Black communists in Alabama were able to pull one over on their white neighbors by meeting and passing along communist pamphlets in secret.

The Russian Revolution incited the establishment of Communist Parties throughout the world

Marxism had been applied to countries in Europe but not to countries like Russia before - where the working class was *not* the majority. Lenin, rather than establishing a bourgeoisie via a democratic revolution argues that the peasantry can be put to use in the revolution. In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin argues that there must be a vanguard party, the educated elite, who knew their place in the class struggle and would be able to lead the working class to revolution. Marxism-Leninism was born. Lenin theorized that imperialism was the greatest stage of capitalism, as it seeks to create surplus profit by not paying/enslaving the working class. Marxist-Leninists (MLs) believe that class revolution does not automatically occur after class consciousness is reached. Instead, it is up to the leadership to push for revolution. Once the revolution has begun, the dictatorship of the proletariat will be established to deal with counterinsurgents and establish bureaucratic order. Only after the capitalists are forgotten will we begin the withering away of the state.

▶ AUTHORITARIAN COLLECTIVISMS

- **Collectivism** - the supposedly non-political term for holding things in common; traditionally synonymous with communist, but due to the relation 'communist' as word now has with the USSR, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Vietnam, etc., this term provides a more specific definition without the 'baggage' of those connotations.
- **Authoritarian** - the use of government almost exclusively for austerity; traditionally descriptive of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, as it was coined by Hannah Arendt to discuss these regimes comparatively
- **Authoritarian collectivism** - when the government uses austerity measures to nationalize and keep nationalized all industry, property, and culture, holding this in what it calls 'the commons' but which is in practice exclusive to the party and its government; ex. USSR, PRC, DPRK
 - We might counterpose this term with authoritarian industrialism or **authoritarian ultranationalism** (ex. Third Reich, Franco's Spain, Mussolini's Italy). Authoritarian ultranationalism may not hold everything in government possession, as it may privatize industries to be held as a monopoly by party members, as was done during the Third Reich. Authoritarian ultranationalist regimes also often use war as the mechanism for profit since taxation can only go so far in countries that heretofore have been quite poor. However, countries like modern-day UAE and Qatar mimic similar authoritarian ultranationalist regimes from the twentieth century, except that they are often religio-monarchies and this galvanize not nationalists but religious extremists to their aid.



DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM, PERMANENT REVOLUTION, SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY

- **democratic centralism** – most associated with ML praxis, this is the method of discussion and election whereby what is decided by election is binding for all members. In practice, this means that even if one did not vote in favor of a particular agenda item, you must respect and indeed support that item if it passes a vote. Party leaders, agenda items, and political platforms have been decided using this method (including in social democratic parties); it is historically associated with the USSR and the PRC, even though some have argued that behind-the-scenes meddling and pressure invalidates the voting
- **permanent revolution** – Leon Trotsky, the chosen heir apparent of Vladimir Lenin but who was ultimately killed for treason when Stalin seizes power, argues in his text of the same name that in order for socialism to be successful that it must unfold throughout the world consecutively or simultaneously; this is different from the Marx/Engels version of this term, as Marx/Engels use this to describe hard-lining or refusing compromise for class revolution. Trotsky goes further to suggest that class revolution must be viewed in a global context rather than a national context, which also means that now that there is a notion of class revolution and a post-capitalist world, socialist revolution may only be able to come about in a global time ripe for its acceptance. Reactionary times will not bring about socialist revolution, that is.
- **socialism in one country** – Using Lenin's words mostly out of context, Stalin's theories in *Marxism Leninism* and *The Foundations of Leninism* argue that socialism in one country or national communism is a progress toward Leninist future where capitalism can be defeated after a socialist country turns inward in isolationist economic development.

FALSE BROTHERS

HARRINGTON



- What Harrington calls 'pseudosocialisms' are the regimes we often today recognize as communist: the USSR, the PRC, Castro's Cuba, Vietnam, Venezuela, Guyana. However, he quotes Marx's insistence that there will be and have been many 'false brothers' who proclaim their just and altruistic focus even as their movement in practice is nothing of the sort. Harrington asks pointedly *Does a movement or society claiming to be socialist in fact institutionalize the power of the people over the means of production? Or does it rationalize the power of a dominant class or stratum over the people?* We ought to make the point here that often, we look to failed regimes of self-ascribed socialisms as evidence of Marxism's fundamental failure.
- It may be easy, he writes, to write off communism as inherently flawed due to its misuse by these regimes; however, we ought to remember that America's founding fathers claimed their new country a 'democracy' even as they traded and owned human beings. This suggests that bad data does not invalidate an experiment. To look back to those questions again: *Does a movement or society claiming to be democratic in fact institutionalize power of the people or does it rationalize the power of a dominant class?*
 - In cases like the USSR and the PRC, he writes, they are not communist or socialist, but they are collectivist: essentially "the state that possesses those means of production is virtually the private property of a bureaucracy that manages them *in the name of* the people...the people have no control over the economy they theoretically own." Sound familiar?

When Stalin becomes the head of state for the USSR, he can (and does) use the imagery of the revolution, including his predecessor, to validate his own authoritarian practices. This appeal to revolutionary fervor is very similar to the kind of nationalist fervor we saw in the US prior and during the occupation of Iraq in the 2000s.

WHY AUSTERITY?

HARRINGTON

- In what Harrington calls a 'bureaucratic collectivism,' power is decided based upon "the position of an individual, or a class...rather than, as under capitalism, in the economic and social structure" — in other words one's adherence to party politics creates social mobility, different from a capitalist society wherein accumulation of capital (or the performance of this using credit) creates social mobility. This difference of social capital and real capital becomes blurred with the post-industrial consumerist economy (which we will discuss in a couple of weeks).
- But why allow for decades the recreation of this authoritarian regime when not only are there potentially better options available, but the entire world is already hoping that the Communism in your country falls anyway?
- Well, for starters, it's not so simple: in places like PRC and North Korea, media is incredibly monitored – nothing comes in or out without the bureaucracy knowing.
- Harrington argues that these governments "are not the creation of conspiratorial devils, but the historic product of societies trying to achieve rapid economic development under conditions that do not permit the classic Western road to modernity." Put another way, China in just under 75 years went from a country ridden with internal strife to the second largest economy in the world (and it will soon become the largest). It was able to do this only through its austerity measures — its collectivist mantra that 'what is good for China is good for the individual.' "Antidemocratic collectivization planned by the state is one way to try to compress the brutalities of that process of 'primitive accumulation' so as to allow the creation of independent national economies in a matter of decades" rather than 1-2 centuries. In the developing world (Angola, Cuba, Vietnam, China), this will be used as national independence, as well. Thus, it more obviously co-opts the bourgeois/democratic revolutionary rhetoric using collectivization. This, Harrington argues, is different from the Western process to modernization, which consisted of 1-2 centuries of colonial robbery, rape, internal civil war, and mass immiseration & disease. Yet, we might consider that even though there was not nationalization (collectivization), the slaveholding class did have the near exclusive monopoly on bureaucratic power in the US.

THE EVENTS IN RUSSIA, IN SHORT

HARRINGTON

- Drawn out by the incessant sectarianism allowing the time of revolutionary vitality to pass, Lenin allowed the dictatorship of the proletariat to become the dictatorship of the majority of the Bolshevik Party. The leader and the party no longer represented the masses as they actually were (in the way the primary Soviets of soldiers, workers, etc had). They represented the masses *as they should be*.
- This resulted in a 'temporary' dictatorship over the people in the name of the people, a radical and tragic redefinition of the meaning of socialism that would haunt the world through today.
 - At an earlier time, Trotsky had critiqued Lenin's idea of the vanguard as "substitutionism" whereby the proletariat were substituted with the party, the party was substituted with the organization of the party, the organization of the party was substituted with the central committee, and the central committee was substituted with the leader of the party.
 - In 1920, Lenin says in a speech "the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts...that an organization taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletariat dictatorship" – in other words, the vanguard must lead and the rest will follow for their own good.
- Primitive accumulation in Soviet Russia: Between 1929-1934, the Soviet peasantry was forced into collective farms, resulting in a famine. This led to thousands of internal migrants toward the urban factories, but without the infrastructure to house them, they often left their jobs three times a year. Thus, Stalin decreed that every worker was tied to their factory (think: serfdom) and prevented from leaving without permission. In 1931, income inequality continued to skyrocket as Stalin denounces "equality mongering" as anti-revolutionary. Executives received many times the money received by workers and also had access to housing and special stores.

SOVIET SOCIALISM, EXPORTED

HARRINGTON

- Soviet Socialism, writes Harrington, was "a bureaucratically controlled and planned nationalized economy that carried out the function of 'primitive accumulation' and thus achieved rapid modernization. The state owned the means of production, which made some people think it must be socialist; but the Party and bureaucracy 'owned' the state by virtue of a dictatorial monopoly on political power. Such a situation was a moral disaster for socialism, the corruption of the ideal from within, a 'false brother' with superficially plausible claim to authenticity.
- Chinese communism "created a state apparatus based on the Party itself before their triumph and there were no organized forces independent of it...a Party dictatorship, formed under egalitarian conditions of armed struggle in the countryside and committed to the Stalinist path to modernity, ran headlong into the limits of Chinese poverty and discovered that an authoritarian will could not overcome them. This was repeated in countries smaller and on the whole poorer than China or Russia (Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau).
- There were, Harrington concludes, many structural factors that made it impossible for the developing world to create an authentic socialism and led them to take a path of authoritarian collectivism. However, he writes, it is also one of the illusions of capitalism that it has found the 'natural' economy.
 - It is true that in Britain and France (and the US), capitalist revolution followed upheavals from below as the old society was challenged — but these were often met with tremendous backlash. In Germany and Japan, though, capitalist revolution occurred from above: through bureaucracies of agrarian ruling class making alliances with weak commercial class. Capitalist development in these instances was statist, authoritarian, and was eventually a right-wing military dictatorship.
- Harrington argues that when one turns from Europe to the colonized world, the 'preconditions' of modernity are tied up with global markets such that extreme authoritarian, statist strategies of modernization simply mimic or deepen the already existent trend of absolutist (top-down) power in the location. Moreover, in the end, Stalinism did institutionalize 'socialist' praxis and many would come along see it, ignore the crimes, and conclude any economic progress was socialist.

STATE CAPITALISM - WHAT IS IT?

- Often, leftists will describe the Chinese example (and the Soviet example before) as 'state capitalist.' This term is identical to Harrington's term **authoritarian collectivism**. The difference here is in emphasis. Harrington's term emphasizes the notion of collectivism being handled in an authoritarian manner, whereas state capitalist emphasizes the ultimate goal of primitive accumulation using the state as mechanism for accomplishing this.
- Trotsky also coins the term "**degenerated workers' state**" by which he is referencing the Soviet Union under Stalin. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky argues that when the dictatorship of the proletariat gives way to the dictatorship of a minority clique within the party bureaucracy, it has degenerated.
- **From Elliott Liu, *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Introduction*:** At its most basic level, state capitalism, like all forms of capitalism, entails the continual separation of human beings from our objective conditions of labor, on an ever-increasing scale. "Labor" in this sense is a broad category, entailing almost any kind of creative activity. Labor's "objective conditions" include everything we interact with in order to create new things: raw materials, tools, and machines, but also the food, drink, clothing, and so on needed to sustain our labor. In order to perpetuate itself, every human society must continually recreate the objective conditions of labor in some form. Each society does so through specific kinds of social relations, which in turn imbue the things people create with functions and meanings within that society.
- In capitalist society our labor is alienated from us, and the things we create are alienated in turn. Chinese state capitalism displayed this fundamental dynamic, even though the role of the state in directing the economy, and the forms of state property through which accumulation operated, lent it a particular character different from other advanced capitalist countries. Because of its essentially capitalist dynamics, and considering its statist distortions, China under Mao can reasonably be characterized as "state capitalist."

THE CHINESE EXAMPLE

- Chinese workers produced capital, and were dominated by it. They did not control the means of production they operated, nor did they enjoy free access to the means of subsistence they produced: to access the former they needed to work for wages under a boss, and to access the latter they needed to purchase commodities on the market. While workers did participate in management committees alongside party cadres at some points in the Maoist era, their input remained limited. Generally they decided how to best execute economic plans formulated from above, or offered feedback on plans over whose final content they had little control. They were excluded from the central decisions shaping social reproduction: the division of use-values between consumption and further production, the distribution of the social product into different areas of production, and coordination between these areas. Instead this control lay with cadres at the head of individual enterprises, provinces and the central government, who acted as managers and administrators of capital.
- On the surface, little capitalist property existed in Mao's China, since the vast majority of industrial enterprises and farms were not owned as the private property of individuals (with exclusive control over their use, sale, and the profits) but were rather the property of the state or collective. However, the juridical form taken by social relations is a separate thing from these relations themselves...Capital need not always appear in the form of individual private property in order to function as capital, and accumulation can operate smoothly through many forms of collective and public property as well (see *Capital* Vol. III).
- Beneath their legal status as state and collective property, enterprises in Mao's China still functioned as capitals. Enterprises competed to accumulate capital more efficiently than one another, though this competition was more bureaucratic and less market-mediated than in advanced capitalist societies. From the perspective of individual bureaucrats, their class mobility depended partly on market performance, but more so on their standing with the higher-level officials who interpreted this performance.

AMERICAN LENINISM

William Z. Foster: "Opportunism, where it did not mean unwillingness to follow orders, signalled an infection spread to the Communist ranks and to the working class at large by the outside society. American labor is still asleep drugged into insensibility by bourgeois propaganda...and the worst of it is that it is making no effort toward awakening...American labor takes capitalist economics and morals for granted...It is our calamity and discredit that [one] had to come to America to find the spectacle of a great labor movement which has not yet freed itself intellectually from the bonds of capitalism."

'Bad Bishop' William Montgomery Brown: The deliverance of the world from commercial imperialism and the making of it safe for industrial democracy would prevent most of its unnecessary suffering and this great salvation is above all else dependent upon a knowledge of the truth. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free"—free from all the avoidable ills of life, among them the diabolical trinity of evils, war, poverty and slavery...My experience has convinced me that the sentimental and poetical elements in religion, to which I attach as much importance as ever, are as readily excited and securely sustained by fixing thought and sympathy upon the martyred human savior, the working class, as upon a crucified divine saviour, who after all, as the suffering son of God, is but a symbol of the suffering sons and daughters of man, the workers, from whom all good things come...As long as gods dominate the sky and capitalists prevail upon the earth, the world will be safe for commercial imperialism, having a small heaven for the few rich masters and a large hell for the many poor slaves.

AMERICAN LENINISM

- Inasmuch as Communists consciousness represented the unskilled worker as potentially triumphant, their immanent new society within the old had presumably to reflect upon itself, develop itself intellectually, understand itself. The consequent experiment in workers' own writing, 'Workers' Correspondence' initiated in the mid-1920s across the spectrum of Party papers, aimed to elicit reports, commentaries, intelligence from the bottom-most levels. Socialist and Wobbly editors had often tried the same thing, but without much success, and without the high-flown formulation. Their Communist counterparts found themselves in fact writing the contributions for the most part, on verbal reports mostly factual rather than interpretive. The experiment had too little chance amid factional warfare, shifting membership, and hard political times.
- This failure pointed to a lasting contradiction between theory and practice, hidden by the economic crisis just ahead but never entirely overcome. The basis of the old Socialist movement, and the ideal of the Communist movement, was the autodidact proletarian, thirsting for knowledge that only Marxism could give him. US workers, especially skilled workers, often had public education backgrounds by the 1920s. But quite apart from a general lack of political sympathy for Communist literature they considered daft, they had already bypassed reading as a major form of entertainment and enlightenment. The desire for a truly proletarian literature symbolized the urgency of a missing dimension in American Communism's first decade. How could the Communists dream of taking power when they lacked the rudimentary indications of a class-conscious working class?
- By the 1930s, they had no choice but to ally themselves with the New Deal Popular Front of the Democratic Party - electoralism that betrayed the very nature of the IWW for many.

NEXT CLASS...

June 30 - Rise of the Culture Critique (1925-1940)

During the Interwar period, Marxist academics contributed greatly to the study of Marxism in a variety of ways. The birth of what is today called Critical Theory (was then called Culture Critique) has its beginnings in three major thinkers: Freud, Nietzsche/Weber, Marx. As fascism began to take hold throughout Europe, intelligentsia fled. Additionally, the Soviets would also contribute their own theories of what should and should not be socialist culture (György Lukács, Sergei Eisenstein). As most already have a ready grasp on Critical Theory, we will spend the majority of our time on Soviet contributions to theory and how these are applied in the arts.

- Ch. 5 "Rise of the Culture Critique" in *Marxism in the United States* by Paul Buhle
- Selections from *Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci
- Selections from *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, ed. Xiaoning Lu, Aga Skrodzka, K. Marciniak
- Watch *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón)